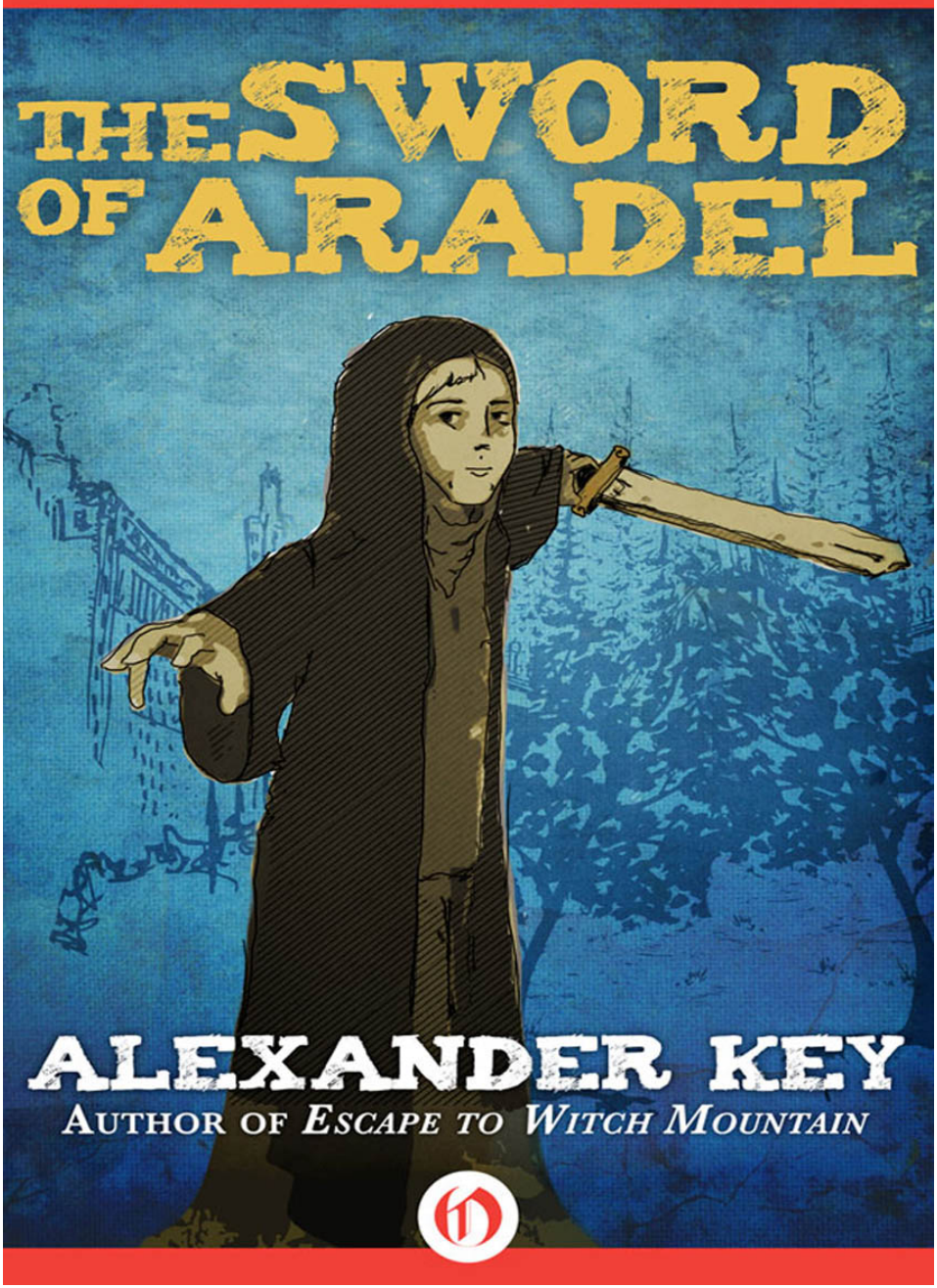
THE SWORD OF ARADEL



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The Sword of Aradel

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1
Fight at St. Martin's

Brian, the pale-haired stableboy at St. Martin's Abbey, crawled from his bed of straw in the hayloft that morning with an unpleasantly cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. The feeling was a sure sign of coming trouble, and he knew from unhappy experience there was very little he could do to avoid it. Unless, of course, he could find the courage to run away.

As he felt his way down the ladder in the predawn darkness, he wondered what his chances would be if he actually did leave the abbey and go out into the world. Surely he was old enough to try it now. And, thanks to the secret instruction of Brother Benedict, he could read and write in the three languages, and probably hold his own with any of the titled students at the abbey school. Only, where could he go? What could he do?

Outside in the courtyard he dusted the straw from his ragged jerkin, stopped just long enough at the watering trough to wash his face, and then hurried over to the hidden corner between the smithy and the great outer wall. Brother Benedict had not yet arrived. Turning, he peered through the shrouding curtain of grapevines at the buildings across the courtyard.

The abbey was like a walled village, complete in itself, with workshops and storehouses. In the center, surrounding the spired cathedral, were cloisters, dormitories, refectories, two kitchens, and a chapel. At this hour all the buildings were dim silhouettes against an uninviting sky that was becoming streaked with an angry red.

The sight of the sky did nothing to ease Brian's state of mind. Suddenly he hated the abbey and his lowly station, and more than ever he hated the students, all of them the arrogant sons of noblemen who thought nothing of kicking him around like a worthless slavey. Even some of the monks, who treated the peasants as if they owned them, were more brutal than pious, and Brian was seldom without a bruise to remind him of the fact.

"But why?" he wondered aloud. "Has it always been this way? What right have the high to beat the low?"

"No right," came the cool and curiously decisive voice of Brother Benedict. "By my faith, no right whatever."

Brian spun about and saw the burly form of the monk emerging from the smithy. In the reddening dawn light he could just make out the broad face with its scars, as from old sword cuts, and the tight mouth as grim as a river turtle's. As much as Brian loved him, he couldn't shake the belief that Brother Benedict was not entirely the man of God that he appeared to be. Under that gray robe was a very strange person. Who would dream that a master of the sword and quarterstaff would also be a master of languages and philosophy? Yet no one seemed aware of these attainments, for Brother Benedict managed to remain

quietly in the background, and was known only as the abbey blacksmith.

"It has not always been this way," the monk added. "Nor will it continue for long. But I speak too much. Let us get on with our practice before this place awakens."

Brian caught the quarterstaff his teacher flung to him, then crouched, holding the seven-foot length of oak firmly on either side of the center. It was the poor man's weapon of defense, and one skilled in its use could down a swordsman. He tried to parry the blows that were now rained upon him, but this morning his heart was not in it.

Brother Benedict stopped. "What's wrong, son?"

"It—it's that awful feeling again. Something's going to happen. You know how it was last time."

His teacher nodded. That last time Brian had been too slow in drawing water for the abbot's horse, and the prior had had him tied up by the thumbs till dark and given twenty lashes.

Brian added dispiritedly, "I—I just can't take any more of that. I've got to run away."

Brother Benedict shook his head. "Not yet, son. I know how hard it is for you. But remember, all things change. You must be brave and suffer it a while longer."

"I don't see why."

"There are reasons."

"What reasons?"

"You will learn in time."

"That's what you always tell me when I ask questions. I don't understand why you even bother with me."

"I bother with you, my son, because I happen to know you are worth it. You are worth a great deal of bother."

"But—but I'm nobody! You know that."

"Never say you are nobody. Everyone is a person, private within himself. That makes everyone somebody."

The monk reached under the vines and produced a pair of rusty practice swords. "Let us work with these a bit, then you'd better see to your chores."

Brian took one of the weapons and began a ritual cut and thrust under his teacher's direction, but part of his mind was suddenly asking questions. Why was Brother Benedict always so secretive? Of course, these were not the best of times, and if you valued your head, you kept a guard on your tongue. Yet he was certain at last that his friend was involved in a matter that could be highly dangerous. What could it be? Not only that, but it was beginning to seem that Brother Benedict knew something about him that he didn't know himself.

But that was impossible, he thought. He was just another woodcutter's son; his father, old Harle, used to get wood for the abbey. The hut where he was born was hardly a league away; he could remember every ugly detail of it. No, there was nothing in the life of Brian, son of poor Harle, that could be of the least interest to anyone. And yet …

There was that strange little strawberry girl.

He had a sudden sharp vision of the small cringing figure in the ragged dress and shawl who had been bringing wild strawberries in to sell to the monks. He

had supposed she was some peasant's child, but yesterday when she stopped at the smithy—she always managed to have a talk with Brother Benedict when no one was watching—a curious thing had happened. A nightingale had flown down and alighted on her hand. She had whispered to it, and the bird had sung a quick little song, and then had flown away.

Brian remembered his surprise, and then the shock that had gone through him as the nightingale flew off. For the girl had raised her head, and her shawl had slipped back and exposed her long golden braids. Nor did she have a peasant's face—it was far too bright and lively and full of mischief. He'd been carrying water from the well to fill the watering trough, and had stopped and stared. At the same moment her quick green eyes had caught sight of him, and she had smiled. Then she had jerked the shawl back in place and turned away, becoming the subdued little peasant figure she had seemed at first.

Brian's sword was suddenly flicked from his grasp, and Brother Benedict stepped back, shaking his head.

"No, my son! No! The first rule of self-defense is never to let your attention stray from your opponent. What were you thinking about, anyway?"

"That—that girl who brings the strawberries," he admitted. "Who is she?"

The monk's hard face broke into a rare smile. "You are rather young to have girls on your mind. And she's hardly more than an infant."

"She—she's no infant," Brian retorted. "I saw her face yesterday, and she must be nearly as old as I am. And that's not all—" He paused suddenly as a startling thought came to him. Yesterday he'd been close enough to overhear part of what she'd said to Brother Benedict. It wasn't the words he remembered so much as the language she'd used.

"She wasn't talking to you in the local French," he said. "It was Latin—good Latin. The kind we use."

Brother Benedict raised his eyebrows. "Well?" he said mildly.

"But—but the peasants hardly know it."

"You're a peasant. Yet you are fluent in Latin. You have a gift for languages—I've taught you several. And you forget that Latin is universal—it is spoken by the educated all the way from Rome to the green isles of Britain."

Brian chewed on his lip a moment, then managed a grin. "You're trying to lead me around by the nose," he accused. "Let's get back to that strawberry girl. She's no ordinary person. She's pretending to be what she isn't. And she knows something about me."

He paused again, thinking of the quick little smile she'd given him. A knowing smile. It had conveyed a world of information. "She knows a lot about me," he went on. "She practically told me so. Who is she?"

"You are very discerning, my son. I'm sorry."

"Please. I—I've got to know about her."

"She is one of us," the monk said quietly. "That is all I can tell you now."

Brian started to protest, but Brother Benedict held up his hand. "The less you know of some matters, my son, the safer you will be. I don't want you to die before your time, like your father."

Brian could only stare at him, mouth half open. So it was true. Something *was* going on. And he, Brian, son of poor old Harle who had lived in want and died ignobly in the last revolt, was in some unknown way concerned in it. Was

another peasants' revolt being planned?

He was beginning to hear sounds of life around him and was all at once aware that the ugly red of dawn had spread entirely across the sky. It was a frightening sight. The chill in the pit of his stomach had become a cold clutching, and he was tempted to gather up his few possessions and leave in spite of being urged to remain.

"You'd better get that watering trough filled," Brother Benedict reminded him. "If the prior happens to come out before breakfast …"

Brian sighed and started around the smithy for the well. But he had taken only a few steps when he was stopped in his tracks by the sudden blare of trumpets somewhere in the distance. The sound seemed to come from the edge of the forest where the road from the castle ran past the fields and the sprawling village.

He had heard the signal of the trumpets often enough to know that it announced the arrival of visitors of importance who had come from the castle. But trumpets at this hour? It was unheard of. He had about decided that his ears had tricked him when the trumpets sounded again, nearer, louder, demanding. It was an order for the drawbridge that spanned the moat to be lowered immediately.

St. Martin's Abbey came abruptly to life. Gray-robed monks and velvet-clad students of the abbey school, some of them still hastily pulling on their clothing, swarmed into the courtyard. There were shouts from the lookout tower above the gate, and then Brian could hear the creaking of the blocks as the drawbridge was lowered.

"What—what could have happened?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

Brother Benedict growled an oath that was decidedly unmonklike. "Something devilish," he muttered. "You may bet on it. And you may bet all the gold in Aradel that Albericus is behind it."

Brian had never seen the hated Albericus, but the very name of that witch-hunting monk brought a chill to his spine. Then he heard the quick clatter of hooves as an advance messenger raced over the drawbridge. It was a page wearing the green and gold of Aradel.

The page drew rein in the center of the courtyard. He slid from the saddle, breathless, and managed to gasp, "The duke is dead!" Then, catching his breath, he cried out, "Long live the duke!"

There was a moment of stark silence followed by a quick murmuring. Suddenly wild shouts broke out among the students as every eye in the courtyard turned toward a gangling youth with a long jaw and a thin mouth. Until now, he had been merely Rupert of Cloyne. All had known there was a chance—if an evil temper did not bring him to an early end—that he might possibly become the next duke. But only, of course, if his uncle, the crown-seeking Frederick, happened to die before having a son. No one dreamed it would actually happen this very spring.

Beyond the abbey walls came a quick, final flourish of the trumpets. Now horsemen began pouring across the bridge—men-at-arms in glittering coats of mail, barons in bright plumes and velvet, pages and squires bearing pennants and banners; and in their lead, on a great black mule, a towering grim-faced monk in a black robe.

Brian chilled as he stared at the black-robed figure, then all his attention went to the silken cushion the monk carried across his saddle. On the cushion, gleaming with jewels, lay a sword. At the sight of it his eyes widened and he felt a curious prickling at the back of his neck. Was that the fabled sword he'd heard so much about? The magical sword of the fairy folk, said to have been forged ages ago for the first ruler of Aradel?

In spite of some of the whispers he'd heard, it almost had to be. All the rulers of Aradel had worn that sword, and all men respected it. There was power in that ancient blade, and a puppet like Frederick couldn't have ruled without it.

Now Frederick was dead, and here was Albericus, who pulled all the strings, bringing the sword to Rupert. But why at this hour?

"They must have been riding half the night to get here," he whispered to Brother Benedict.

"Of course. Look at them! They make a show, but they are tired and hungry. Yet if they were twice as tired, they'd do no tarrying here. Albericus will have them racing back to Rondelaine the moment he gets Rupert on a horse."

"But—but why the haste?"

"So that black-robed Lucifer can keep his claws on the kingdom. He's lost his puppet, and he must install another in a hurry. If he doesn't, there'll be trouble."

"You mean the peasants might rise against the barons again?"

His teacher grunted. "Not exactly, but surely they'd rise against those you see yonder. They're the ones Albericus made. And if that happens, another outsider will come in and claim Aradel."

Brian nodded, though he did not entirely understand. All he knew of Aradel and the world was what he had learned here in the abbey, and from the books Brother Benedict secretly brought him from the library. It seemed he ought to know far more about some things than he did, but his memory had a curious way of failing when he tried to think back beyond a certain time.

Frowning, he peered through the grapevines at the assembly that was drawing up in a semicircle in the courtyard. The riders dismounted, and now he saw the tall Albericus, who wore a curious headless cross at his waist, slowly approach young Rupert with the cushioned sword in his outstretched hands. Rupert, visibly swelled, stepped forward and grasped the fabled weapon and buckled it about his waist. Finally everyone knelt to show allegiance to the new ruler.

All at once Brian became aware that several of the horses, reins dangling, had edged over to the watering trough and were beginning to drink thirstily. The trough was fast emptying. Then he was horrified to see a long-nosed monk moving around the edge of the assembly, heading for the stable. It was the prior.

"I—I've got to fill that trough!" he whispered, and started to slip through the vines.

Brother Benedict jerked him back. "No! Not the way you are. You must hide that pale hair—it could be the death of you!" The burly monk slipped into the smithy and quickly returned with an old leather cap in his hands. "Pull this down over your ears," he ordered. "Let no one see what lies under it."

It was an odd thing for Brother Benedict to insist on, but there was no time to ask the reason for it. Then the sudden memory of his last beating drove all questions from his mind. He jerked the shapeless cap over his head and ran out to the well.

No one noticed him at first. He managed to draw two buckets of water and pour them into the trough, and was hurrying across the corner of the courtyard with the third when the prior and another monk came from the stable with young Rupert's horse.

Brian saw the prior and the horse, and he glimpsed the swaggering Rupert moving impatiently forward to take the reins. He veered quickly to avoid Rupert, and failed to note the little movement of one of the titled students who slyly thrust a foot in his path. It was an old trick, too often used on him.

He tripped and went sprawling. The bucket slammed out of his grasp, and most of its contents splashed over Rupert's bright hose and pointed boots.

Brian got up cringing, stammering apologies. He was met instantly by a furious blow to the head that knocked off his cap and sent him reeling to the cobblestones.

For brief seconds he was aware of the great, gaunt Albericus staring at him, merciless eyes regarding him oddly. Then he saw the convulsed face of the advancing Rupert. He could hear Rupert's curses, and almost feel the vicious kicks that in the next breath would send him writhing in pain. But in that tiny moment out of time something turned over in him. Old hates came to a boil. Even if it killed him, he knew he had taken all he would ever take from Rupert or his kind.

Just before the first kick reached him he rolled aside and sprang up with clenched fists and smashed Rupert in the mouth. It did little more than bring gasps from the onlookers and send the much stronger Rupert staggering back in a fury, reaching for the fabled sword.

Brian had not counted on this. Fear went through him. The sword was invincible. "For shame!" he cried. "That sword has never been drawn against a peasant of this land, or an unarmed person. For shame!"

"That sword is for destroying enemies!" Albericus said harshly. "Use it! Run the rascal through!"

Brian leaped back as the shining blade flashed toward him. He looked wildly around for an avenue of escape, but other swords suddenly barred the way. He was praying for some means of defense when one came sailing magically through the grapevines. It was a quarterstaff.

He caught it expertly and immediately attacked, more in desperation than in hope. How could he possibly triumph over that incredible weapon? Yet, even if he was fated to die this morning, he was grimly determined to take his opponent with him.

But after only two quick passes with the staff he realized with a shock that something was wrong. Either the sword had lost its magic, or Rupert had no skill whatever in handling it.

Hope rose in him. He attacked furiously with all his strength, driving Rupert back. Suddenly one end of the whirling staff caught the sword on the hilt and sent it flying. While it was still in the air he managed to give Rupert a resounding crack on the head that instantly crumpled him.

For a moment Brian stood trembling, hardly believing what he had done. Then, in a language he did not know he knew, someone shouted to him to run.

He turned and made a dash through the encircling men-at-arms.

2
Merra

IT WAS ONLY BECAUSE EVERYONE IN THE COURTYARD was in a momentary state of shock that Brian was able to reach a corner of the smithy without being stopped. The line of knights and squires, who had been closing in on him during the fight, could have cut him down easily, for their swords were already drawn. But they seemed paralyzed by his incredible victory. Not only was their new ruler lying motionless before them, but the invincible sword of Aradel had been vanquished by a ragged stableboy with a quarterstaff.

Brian's first impulse was to race for the main gate under the drawbridge tower. If he could get through and make it across the drawbridge, there was a good chance he could reach the fringe of forest beyond the road.

But he had taken only a few strides when he heard Albericus giving orders. "Close the gate and raise the bridge!" the gaunt monk shouted. "Shoot him, you bowmen! Kill the wretch! Don't let him get away!"

A whistling arrow made Brian whirl in his tracks. He dodged behind the smithy, saw no one, and began running as fast as he could along the rear of the stable. There was a door ahead where a part of the stable joined the abbey wall. If he could get through it without being seen, he should have time to catch his breath while he planned his next move.

The door opened almost in his face, and a big hand caught his arm and jerked him inside. It was Brother Benedict.

"Follow me," said his burly friend, and began running with surprising speed past a row of stalls and across an open storage area beyond. At the rear of it, where the roof met the abbey wall, the monk slid behind a stack of heavy timbers leaning against the masonry. Here in the shadows Brian made out a small wooden door.

"Better leave your staff," he was advised. "You will not need it, and it will just be in your way."

With some reluctance Brian thrust his quarterstaff among the timbers, and followed his guide. After the door was secured behind them they were in total darkness.

"We have fifty paces to go," Brother Benedict said. "Hold to my robe, and keep in step with me."

Wondering, Brian did as he was told. They seemed to be in a narrow passageway that led in a long curve through the wall. He had heard that this portion of the abbey had once been a fort, built in Roman days. Could this possibly be an old escape route?

"Here we are," Brother Benedict said finally, as a sliver of light outlined one arm. Stooping, he pulled a rough wooden cover away from an opening just large enough to crawl through. Brian peered out at the brightening day.

His view of the moat and the world beyond it was partially obscured by a small tangle of willow shrubs that screened the spot. The moat, nearly covered with lily pads here, was only a few feet below him. Directly opposite, a larger thicket almost hid the embankment that bordered a small field.

"Now you are in on our little secret," Brother Benedict said. "Only a few of us know of this way out of the abbey."

"But the moat—how does one cross it?"

His guide chuckled. "On sunken planks below the lilies. Walk them carefully, or you will slip into the water as I did one night. When you have crossed and reached the field, keep your head down and follow the embankment till you come to the trees. Have no fear of being seen. There's no one on this part of the wall at this hour, and I doubt if there's a worker in the field, for it's been put to pasture."

Brother Benedict paused a moment, listening. Brian knew that a thorough search was being made for him on the other side of the wall, but he could make out no sounds of it here.

Carefully the monk drew something from a fold of his robe. It was the sword Albericus had brought to Rupert.

Brian gasped. "Where—where did you get it?"

"I picked it up near the smithy, where it fell. No one saw me. Take it, son. It may not be all that it is supposed to be—but it happens to be the very finest of weapons, and you won it fairly against great odds. I'm proud of you!"

Brian experienced a sudden thrill as he grasped the jeweled hilt. As a weapon, it was too long and much too heavy for him, but he had no doubt of his ability to use it should the need arise. It suddenly seemed strange that Rupert, who was far taller and stronger, had been so clumsy with it.

"By doing what you did," Brother Benedict went on, "you upset many plans, and set something in motion. But there isn't time to explain it to you here. You must be well on your way before Albericus decides you must have escaped from the abbey. He'll surely send men after you—but do not worry about them. Merra will hide you well."

"Merra? Who—where—"

"In the forest, son, a full three leagues downstream from the Roman crossing, there flows a crystal spring from the foot of a mighty oak. It is a sacred spot, and something in you will know it when you see it. You will find Merra waiting for you there."

"I—I don't understand," Brian said. "How can anyone possibly know I'm coming?"

"She will know. On your way now—and may the merciful God protect you!"

Brian experienced a frightening minute as he waded the moat on the submerged planks. He was exposed to anyone who might have gone to the top of the wall to search, and with every step he almost expected to hear the snap of a bowstring and the quick hiss of an arrow. Yet he dared not hurry, for the planks were so slippery he could only slide along a foot or two at a time while he carried the sword carefully over his shoulder.

Then at last he was across, with the thick growth of willows on the embankment hiding him from any chance observer. When he glanced back he

was relieved to see no one, nor could he make out the opening to the secret passageway.

As he hurried along the edge of the field behind the embankment, he was astonished to see the sun rising above the line of forest ahead. It seemed that hours must have passed since he had first heard the trumpets. How could so much have happened in the short space between dawn and sunup?

Before the sun was a hand's breadth high, he had gained the Roman crossing—a stone bridge built by Caesar's men—and was beginning to pick his way through the tangle along the edge of the stream.

Three leagues downstream, Brother Benedict had said. That was a long, long hike, and he would do well to make it by midday. But why, he wondered, would anyone want to live in so remote a spot? As nearly as he could remember from a map Brother Benedict had at the smithy, that section of the stream was entirely wild, far from any road or village. A few old trails had been dotted on the map, along with a scattering of symbols showing the location of several ruins and a chapel.

Suddenly Brian halted, thinking of those symbols. A cross had marked the location of an early chapel, but there had been another cross deep in the forest just about three leagues from the Roman crossing. Only the second cross, unlike the first, had a circle behind it. What did that mean?

And who was Merra?

Puzzled, he hurried on, swinging the sword occasionally to clear a way through the growth. It seemed that he should know the answers to both questions. And there was that curious matter of the person who had shouted to him right after he'd downed Rupert. Had it been Brother Benedict who had shouted, using a strange language so that no one who had come with Albericus would recognize either the voice or the words?

Then why had he, Brian, son of Harle the woodcutter, understood the words when he didn't even recognize the language?

At that moment a horrible thought came to him. Did he, without realizing it, know the forbidden language? The language that meant death if you were caught using it? It was supposed to be the tongue of the witches, although heretics used it also. The penalty for speaking it—just like the penalty for being caught with a Bible, which was also forbidden—was death by burning.

He had never seen a real Bible, and he had once asked Brother Benedict why it was forbidden. The burly blacksmith had peered around carefully, then said in a low voice, "Watch your tongue on that subject, lad. Now, to boil it all down, it's just a matter of power. Those who have it are always fighting to keep it. Those who don't have it are always oppressed. You see?"

"I'm beginning to. I've heard that the Bible is full of magic, which was put in there by the devil. Is that true, and is that really why it's banned?"

"It is full of miracles and magic, but the devil didn't put them there. That is a great lie, told by the righteous rascals in power. To keep their power, they must destroy those who know the truth."

"Then—then there really is magic?"

"There is, and there are those among us who are able—but no. You are too young to know more. I have told you enough. For your life's sake, and mine, forget what I have said."

That had been years ago, Brian remembered, not long after he had come to the abbey. Today he had fled from it, with more questions than ever unanswered.

Why, for one thing, had Brother Benedict been so anxious for him to cover his pale hair? What was there about pale hair that should be hidden?—and why had Albericus stared at him so strangely when his cap was knocked off?

Then there was the matter of defeating Rupert so easily. Had he really handled the quarterstaff so skillfully—or had someone put a spell on Rupert?

In spite of what Brother Benedict had once told him, he had never really believed in spells and magic. But now he was beginning to wonder.

As he trudged deeper into the forest, following a game trail that wound along the stream, the undergrowth gradually vanished and the trees became immense. Several times herds of deer faded into the shadows, and once he saw a great wolf regarding him with a sort of cold but speculative interest from the other side of the stream. It gave him a moment of sharp fright. The sword, which he had been carrying over his shoulder, was swept down instantly to a ready position. But the wolf did not move, and he hurried thankfully on his way.

Having eaten no breakfast, and only a bowl of thin gruel the night before, he was very hungry by midmorning. But he knew little of the woods and saw nothing that seemed edible. Even the few strawberries he found were green.

He stopped at times to drink hastily from the stream, and as the day grew warmer he was tempted to shed his ragged and none-too-clean garments and plunge into the cool water. Only the fear of Albericus, who surely had sent men to hunt him, kept him on the move.

Brian had lost all sense of time when he stumbled finally into an open glade. The place was covered with a lush growth of wild strawberries. He did not at once notice the wide crystal pool ahead, and the ancient oak beside it—an oak so huge that it entirely dominated this parklike corner of the forest. All he saw were the berries. There were thousands of berries, lusciously red and ripe.

He fell eagerly on his knees and began stuffing them into his mouth as fast as his hands could pick them.

Suddenly a mischievous voice somewhere behind him said, “Are you enjoying my strawberries, Brian of the horse trough?”

He grabbed at his sword and managed to scramble to his feet. Juice was running from his mouth, which was far too full for speech. He could only gulp and stare.

A few yards away a small slender figure, arms on hips and dressed like a boy in green doublet and hose, was watching him with amusement. The lively face under the green cowled cap was a girl’s, and it seemed curiously familiar. But where could he have seen anyone like her? She was dressed entirely in green—but the greenest things about her, from the bright feather in her cap to her small green boots, were her eyes. They were as brilliantly green as the jewels in the hilt of his sword.

He was wondering about her eyes when a small bird fluttered down and alighted on her shoulder. It was a nightingale.

“You—you’re that strawberry girl!” he stammered.

She gave a gay little laugh. “Of course! I’m Merra.” Suddenly she took a step forward, her nose crinkling. “Give me your sword,” she demanded.

Hesitantly he held it out, hilt first.

She took it firmly in both hands and thrust the point toward him, forcing him backward. “You stink,” she said, green eyes dancing. “Brian of the horse trough, you smell of the stable. Back you go—into the cleansing waters! Whee!” she cried, as he fell with a great splash into the crystal pool.

He came up gasping, then found his footing and shook the water from his face, and saw her crouched on the bank in front of him. Eyes bright, she was watching him like an impish kitten.

“Off with your filthy rags!” she ordered imperiously, pointing the sword at him. “Off with the dirt beneath them! And when you are clean as a lamb, you may come forth and don your new clothes. They are here by the ferns.”

Utterly bewildered by her, he watched her turn away and vanish across the glade. Then he drew off his rags and began to wash. When he crawled out finally, he found a towel and a complete outfit in green almost exactly like her own. There were even a leathern pouch with coins in it and a small sheath knife to hang from his belt.

The moment he was dressed she appeared, sword over her shoulder, and studied him critically. “What a change!” she exclaimed in her gay little voice. “Why, you could almost pass for one of your betters!”

Her silvery laugh tinkled, as if at some private joke. Then abruptly she became very serious. Drawing herself up to her full height, which was hardly to his chin, she ordered in a truly regal manner, “On your knee, Brian of the horse trough! Kneel!”

He submitted, deciding that so strange a person had much better be humored.

She brought the point of the sword down and touched him lightly on the shoulder. “Brian of the horse trough,” she went on, switching easily from Latin to English, “by right of my birth and powers, and because of thy pale hair and valor, I dub thee Sir Brian the Fair. Arise, Sir Brian, and take thy well-won blade —and a murrain seize our enemies! All those wretched rogues and devil’s whelps who fain would stop us!”

“Stop us from what?” he could not help asking as he took the sword. For he realized all at once that she was deadly serious and meant every word she had said.

“From saving Aradel!” she replied hotly. “From destroying that horrible Albericus before he burns all the good people! But most of all, from succeeding in our search—for if we fail in that, then everything is lost! Everything!”

He could only gape at her, wondering what incredible sort of creature she was.

“Oh fie!” she exclaimed. “I see you don’t understand. But of course you don’t! I forget. How could you possibly understand—after the spell that was put upon you?”

“What spell?”

“The one that changed your memory. It was a powerful spell, and I don’t know how to break it. So I suppose I must explain it all to you. You see, to begin with —”

“To begin with,” he interrupted, “there’s nothing wrong with my memory. But I’d like to know how you learned I was coming here. And—and these clothes I’m wearing. How—”

She sighed, rolling her eyes as if fighting for patience. “It’s very simple, Sir

Brian. I was told from afar what happened this morning at the abbey. How you bested that stupid and unmannered lout of a Rupert, and escaped—"

"Told from afar?" he interrupted again. "I—I've never heard of such a thing! It's impossible!"

She stamped her foot. "If it's impossible, you silly goose, how is it that I know all about you, and even sent Tancred ahead to watch for you? But I suppose you didn't even notice him."

"I—I didn't see anybody. Who is he?"

"Tancred isn't a person—though he's certainly smarter than most people. He's my nightingale."

"Oh." She was becoming stranger to him all the time. "Is—is it Brother Benedict you talk to from afar?"

"Of course. He's much more than a monk, though few at the abbey know it." She hesitated, then added, "And he happens to be my uncle."

"Your—your *uncle?*"

She nodded. "My father's brother. The family has long been a great one in Aradel."

"Then what are you doing way out here, so far from everything?"

"I live with my mother's people. And all my friends are here." She flashed him a quick look with her green eyes, and added quietly, almost hopefully, "They are hard for most mortals to see, but they are all around us. Can you not hear them singing?"

He stared at her a moment, then turned quickly and peered about him. For the first time he became fully aware of the crystal pool in which he had been forced to wash, the stream joining it on the left, and the tremendous oak on the right, the greatest of all the trees in this ancient grove. Something stirred deep within him, and unconsciously he crossed himself. Did he really hear singing—or was it only the soft music of running water and the wind?

He started to ask Merra about it, but at that moment the nightingale, which he had not seen since his bath, swooped down to her shoulder, burbling excitedly.

"What's the matter, Tancred?" she asked. "What is it?"

She listened to it a moment, lip caught between her teeth. Suddenly she said, "I sent him back to see if you were being followed. You are. Hunting dogs are on your trail. Some men-at-arms are behind them, and Albericus is leading them!"

Shock held him rigid a moment. Had he made Albericus so very angry that the gaunt monk would come after him in person?

Merra clutched his sleeve. "Hurry! I've got to hide you!"

3
The Secret of Cerid

As Merra drew him in the direction of the great oak, Brian suddenly remembered the rags he had discarded. “My old clothes,” he gasped. “I’d better get them! If the dogs find them, Albericus will know I’m somewhere near.”

He ran back along the edge of the pool, caught up the sodden rags, wadded them into a bundle, and hurried to overtake his guide. But she had stopped abruptly at the side of the oak and was looking up at it intently, chanting something in a language that was strange to him. Even so, he found he understood the words:

> “Oh ancient tree, most noble tree,
> Please open wide a door for me.”

Brian was almost certain the great tree had had a smooth trunk when he first saw it, but now there seemed to be a hollow place in front of him. It looked so natural, however, that he wondered if it hadn’t been there all the time. But before he could make up his mind about it, Merra caught his sleeve and drew him through the opening.

When he glanced quickly back over his shoulder, he was somewhat jolted to see the opening close behind him. Then he forgot it as he glanced around at the cozy circular room with its fireplace on one side, and a stairway carved out of the tree winding upward on the other. No windows were in evidence, but the room was softly lighted by a warm glow that came from recesses in the walls. Curiously, the room seemed larger than the tree.

“Welcome, Brian,” said a musical voice. “I am Nysa, Merra’s aunt. I’ve heard so much about you—”

“Albericus is coming!” Merra interrupted. “He’s got men-at-arms and dogs! We’ve got to do something!”

“Heaven preserve us!” replied the musical voice, whose owner Brian could not see. “This calls for extreme measures. Merra, speak to Grinder. Ask him to get his friends and drive those dogs away. And I will see what I can do about the weather. A storm has been brewing. If I can draw it nearer …”

Brian stood frozen, with his mouth agape, looking first at Merra, then about the room for the invisible Nysa. Merra had seated herself on a stool by the hearth; eyes closed, small hands clenched, her lips began moving soundlessly. Beyond her, unseen, he could hear someone softly chanting. He became aware of a faint keening of wind in the distance. It grew louder and sharper. Suddenly there was a great roaring of wind outside. Then down drummed the rain, furiously as if it would wash the earth away.

Brian shook his head. He had been seeing and hearing things he did not

believe in. Even now, with the storm raging outside, he could not bring himself to admit that an invisible person—if Nysa was a person—had brought it about. Then he realized that Merra had opened her eyes and was looking at him mischievously.

"Have we shaken you mightily, Sir Brian?" she asked.

"I—I wish you wouldn't call me that," he managed to say. "You know I'm not a knight. Why, I'm not even old enough to be a squire."

"I knighted you," she said tartly. "And if I wish to call you Sir Brian the Fair, I will."

"And I think you'd better let her, Sir Brian," came the voice of Nysa, laughing. "Though very young, she is still a great lady in her own right. And I may as well tell you that, if she safely reaches her next birthday, she will live to bestow knighthood upon many before she leaves this realm. It is only fitting that you should be the first." A pause, then she asked, "Merra, what did Grinder tell you?"

"Ha! He's calling the packs together. And he promised not only to get rid of the dogs, but to chase Albericus and his men out of the forest. Oh, I'd love to see that!"

"Who—who is Grinder?" Brian found himself asking.

"The king of the wolves," Merra said promptly. "He's one of my best friends. He told me he saw you earlier, when you were on your way here."

Brian swallowed and ran his tongue over dry lips. "You—you talk to people from afar, and to birds and wolves. And you have relatives who are invisible. What—what are you, anyway?"

It was the unseen Nysa who answered. "We are of the Dryads," she told him softly. "Many of us live in this grove. We preside over the forests, and the things of the forests."

"Wood nymphs!" he burst out. "But—but there are no such creatures! Anyhow, I don't believe in them. I—I just can't!"

"Fie on you!" Merra cried. "You babble like an idiot! And that is no way to talk to Nysa. You are a guest in her home—and you have her to thank for the very clothes you are wearing!"

Brian swallowed again. He suddenly felt like an unmannered oaf. "I—I'm sorry," he pleaded. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. But you see, no one at the abbey—except Brother Benedict—believes in much of anything, and they laugh at anyone who does. But I'm learning. After all I've seen today …"

"I understand," said Nysa. "Laughter is a terrible weapon. It destroys all belief. Not many believe in us now, and when all people cease to believe, we will cease to exist. Even our sacred groves will be gone …" There was a sigh of sadness, then she asked, "How do your new clothes feel?"

"Oh, wonderful! I do thank you for them."

"I pray you will live to see better. But they are the best my friends and I could get together on such short notice. Here—I'll get rid of those old things."

His sodden rags, which he had been holding all the time, were suddenly taken from his hand. He saw them drift away and vanish through a small doorway he had not noticed before.

"Now let me see your sword," she said.

As he held it out, there was a shimmering in front of him, and a slender girl in a flowing dress that seemed to be made of petals took form. She might have been

Merra's older sister. But her eyes were gray instead of green, and there was no hint of mischief in them.

"I—I see you!" he exclaimed.

"I wanted you to," she told him. "But I haven't the power of Cerid, Merra's mother. She could remain visible for days. With me it's just minutes—but that should be enough to convince you I'm as real as anyone."

She took the sword, studied it curiously, then gave it back. "Beautiful!" she said softly. "It must have cost Albericus much gold, for it had to fool so many people."

Brian's eyes widened. "You mean it's not the true sword of Aradel?"

"Of course not, or you might never have defeated Rupert. Or have you guessed that?"

"I did wonder," he admitted. "But what happened to the true sword?"

"Merra's mother hid it to keep Albericus from getting it. Now the time has come to find it."

Puzzled, Brian glanced from Merra to her aunt. "I don't understand. If Merra's mother hid it, why can't she—"

"Cerid is no longer with us," came the sad reply. "When her husband died, she renounced everything and went to join him. Only you and Merra, using your abilities and working together, can find the sword and bring it back."

"But—but where is it hidden?"

"In the future," Nysa said quietly.

"The *future!*"

"Yes. She hid it a thousand years in the future."

Brian could only stare at her blankly. What she had told him made no sense whatever. Finally he managed to repeat, *"A thousand years in the future?"*

"Yes. Something like that. The exact number of years is unimportant. The sword will remain where she put it until you arrive to claim it. But let us not discuss it now. You are tired and hungry. Later, after you have had food and rest, we will talk it over and decide what to do."

They ate at a small table hidden in an alcove he had not noticed before. The place opened into a passageway that seemed to curve into the rocky hill behind the great tree. Brian wondered what mystery lay at the passageway's other end, then forgot it as he helped himself to the generous slices of black bread and cheese. It was a simple meal, spliced out with wild greens and heaping bowls of Merra's strawberries, but it was better than anything he had ever had at the abbey. Not that good food wasn't served there, only that precious little of it ever reached the stable area.

Presently, as the storm outside slackened, Nysa faded and vanished, then her voice was heard coming from the narrow stairway. "Merra, how is Grinder doing now?"

Merra closed her eyes a moment, then suddenly burst out laughing. "Grinder is having the time of his life! He has a big pack with him; they've driven off the dogs, and now they're after the men. Oh, it's a terrible mess, what with the storm and the horses scared out of their wits, and the men soaked through and frightened. The only one not afraid is Albericus. He's in a black fury!"

"That is nothing to laugh about," Nysa's voice reminded her. "If Albericus even

suspected the Dryads were helping Brian, he would never rest till he had destroyed every tree in this grove."

"Oh dear! Couldn't we stop him somehow?"

"I'm not sure. That creature has powers of his own."

"The true sword would stop him!"

"Of course," said Nysa, her voice receding as she climbed the stairs. "And the sooner you two can find it, the better. I'm going up now to hunt for that formula."

Brian, munching on another piece of cheese, asked curiously, "What formula is she talking about?"

"The one that will take us to the sword, Sir Brian. We always travel by formula." The green eyes held a momentary gleam of mischief. "Surely you don't think I use shanks' pony to take my strawberries to the abbey!"

"I—I sort of wondered," he confessed. "But I've been wondering about a lot of things. You don't go to the abbey just to sell strawberries. And it isn't always to see Brother Benedict—you can talk to him from afar. I know he's mixed up in something, just as you are. What are you? A kind of messenger?"

"Of course! I take messages all over Aradel."

"All over Aradel! But that's impossible!" He shook his head. "You're not a bird!"

"No, but I do have Tancred." She glanced over at the nightingale, asleep on a perch. "I don't know what I'd do without him. Anyway, traveling by formula is much better than flying."

"I—I don't understand. But I don't understand any of this, really."

"My blessed stars! Didn't that scheming uncle of mine tell you *anything?"* But before he could answer she gave an exaggerated sigh and said, "No, of course he didn't. To all your questions I can hear him saying, 'No, Brian, for your own safety it is far better that you do not know!' And naturally he was right—or would have been right if today hadn't happened."

"He said I had upset a lot of plans by downing Rupert. And he also said I'd set something in motion. What did he mean by that?"

"Exactly what he said, Sir Brian."

"But—but it doesn't make sense!"

"But, Sir Brian, you began something by defeating Rupert, for one thing, thus spoiling the plans of Albericus."

"That was an accident. Either that, or something was wrong with Rupert. Beating him was too easy."

"It was no accident," she retorted. "And there was nothing wrong with Rupert. My uncle told me all about it. He was so afraid of what might happen that he had a Saracen bow ready to kill both Albericus and Rupert if you had been cut down. Killing them wouldn't have solved anything, would only have caused fighting all over Aradel for years. So you see—"

"Wait!" he interrupted. "You've got me more mixed up than ever. Are you trying to tell me that I beat Rupert because I'm actually better at arms?"

"Of course, you silly goose! And why shouldn't you be? You are a fair-haired Celt, and you were trained by the greatest swordsman the world has ever known. Why, if Albericus even suspected who my uncle is …" She rolled her green eyes tragically and shook her head.

He could only stare at her, more confused than ever.

Suddenly she gave one of her gay little laughs. “What has being a fair-haired Celt got to do with it?” she said. “And how do I know you are a Celt?” She paused, then said seriously, “I’m younger than you—only a little girl, really—but because my mother was of the Dryads, I was born with knowledge. Now, I will tell you something. Most Celts are dark, but there is a fair strain that produces great leaders and warriors. My father’s people are of that strain. So are you. That is why my uncle wanted you to hide your hair this morning. But Albericus saw it anyway, and knew you for what you are.”

“But that doesn’t explain—”

“I’m not through yet. What I’m trying to tell you is that all the time you were at the abbey, my uncle was training you for a very special mission.”

“To find the true sword?”

“Of course! Only, he wasn’t expecting you to be strong enough and ready for another year or more. But what happened today upset everything. Why, just think what’s happened: The duke is suddenly dead. His only heir—using what was supposed to be the true sword—was beaten and practically disgraced by a stableboy. Oh, la-de-de! Think what all Aradel will be saying as soon as the news is out!”

He blinked. “W-what?”

“Oh, fiddle! Surely you can see! Why, questions will fly like arrows in a battle. Everybody will know Albericus lied about the sword, that he brought Rupert a substitute. So where is the true sword? they’ll ask. And what will Albericus do now? What’s going to happen in Aradel?”

She paused for breath, then rushed on. “I’ll tell you what’s going to happen! Unless we can find the true sword quickly, there’ll be trouble. *Dreadful* trouble. The peasants have been in bondage five years now. They’re ready to fight. So they’ll follow any wretch of a lord who promises freedom. But too many wretches would like to rule Aradel, so there’ll be fighting all over the land. And burnings! Oh, that monster Albericus is so furious now he’ll burn more Celts than ever.”

“Celts?”

“Of course. It’s the Celts he hates and is afraid of. If we had the true sword now, every Celt in the land would rise and follow it. The true sword itself is Celtic.” She pointed to a carved cross with a circle about the center that was hanging above Tancred’s perch. “See? That is a Celtic cross. One just like it is on the hilt of the true sword.”

“Oh!” He remembered the cross with a circle on Brother Benedict’s map.

“This place,” she said, “the grove and the great spring, is sacred to the Celts. Every true Celt feels it when he first sees it. Our leaders, my uncle included, have long used the grove for their secret meetings.”

Suddenly a light began to gleam in the back of his mind. “I want to know about the language,” he said. “Is—is it the one that is forbidden?”

“Yes.”

“Do you speak it?”

Quick mischief shone in her eyes. “Of course I speak it—and so do you!”

“But—but how could I? I’ve never learned it!”

Her merry laughter filled the room. “It is your native tongue, Sir Brian. You

have been speaking it ever since you came in here."

He could only gape at her. She laughed again. Finally she said, "You forget, Sir Brian, that you are under a spell. A very strong one that will lift only when certain deeds are accomplished. For your own protection, you have been made to forget that you know your native tongue, even though you can understand it when you hear it. And you cannot speak it in public."

He thought about this a moment, then asked, "How did you happen to learn all this about me? Did you get it from your uncle? And who put the spell on me? It seems very strange that—well, you've been leading me around by the nose just the way your uncle did. Why don't you—"

"Something's wrong," Merra interrupted suddenly, springing to her feet. "It's Nysa. I can feel her thoughts. Oh dear—she can't find the formula!"

She raced out of the alcove and ran up the stairway. Brian followed a few paces and stood at the foot of the stairs, listening. He could hear Merra's voice somewhere above him, quick, anxious and questioning, and the quiet but worried tones of Nysa. After a long while he heard them returning. Merra appeared first, carrying a tiny box with a jeweled top. Behind her, suddenly shimmering into visibility, came Nysa.

"It's gone!" Merra exclaimed tragically. "The formula was kept locked in this box for years, but now it's gone! What in the world are we going to do?"

4
Search for a Formula

Brian took the box from Merra's unsteady hand and looked at it curiously. It was of silver, and just small enough to fit into his palm. A single large amethyst adorned the top. He flipped it open, saw that it was empty, and slowly closed it.

He looked questioningly at Nysa. "It—it's been locked for years?" he said.

"Yes. It was Cerid's box. She put the formula in it herself—it was written on a little roll of parchment—and locked it and gave it to me to keep. I put it in the cabinet upstairs, with the key beside it." Nysa held up a tiny silver key on a string.

"Why bother to lock it?" he said, frowning at the key.

"Oh, that was just to keep the parchment from falling out accidentally, so it wouldn't be lost or carried away by mice."

"And this is the first time you've unlocked the box since you've had it?"

"Yes. There was no reason why I should have opened it. So long as the box was here with me, I was sure the formula would be safe. Why, I—I simply cannot imagine …"

"Well, someone surely opened the box and took it," he persisted. "Did anyone around here know you had it?"

"Everyone here in the grove knew about it," Nysa said quietly. "We have no secrets from each other. But the Dryads never take. They only give."

"But—but suppose someone just borrowed the formula and forgot to bring it back?"

Nysa shook her lovely head. "Had one of my sisters wanted to borrow it—and we always share what we have—she would have come to me and committed the formula to memory. Oh, I wish that had been the case! We could go to her now and have her write it down for us. As for me—"

"Didn't you ever look at the formula yourself?" Brian asked.

"No. The future repels me. Just being able to divine bits of the future is almost too much at times. But Cerid was curious. It took her months to work out the formula—they are extremely difficult, and few of us can do them—but she managed to finish it just before the invasion."

"What invasion?" Brian asked. "Do you mean the peasant uprising?"

Merra burst out hotly, "There was never a peasant uprising! They fought, but only against the invaders. The idea of an uprising was an evil lie spread by Albericus to hide the truth!"

"Then—then what *was* the truth?" he asked.

"The truth," Nysa replied sadly, "is that Frederick, who just died, was formerly the count of Calabria, that little barony to the north. He not only broke his truce with Gratian, who was king, but broke the Truce of God and invaded Aradel on a Sunday. Albericus planned it, and it was Albericus himself who helped kill

Gratian's family and Cerid's husband, Gerald. The worst of it was they entered Rondelaine Castle under the pretense of bringing gifts—and all they brought was death."

"But the sword!" Brian exclaimed. "The true sword—surely, if the king had it —"

"Gratian wasn't there. He was ill, and Benedict—whom you know as Brother Benedict at the abbey—had taken him down to the sea at Celadon for his health. Thank heaven Merra was with them, or she might have been slaughtered with the rest at Rondelaine."

"Nysa had divined that I'd die if I stayed at Rondelaine," Merra said quickly.

"So I did," Nysa murmured. "I wish I could have done as much for the others, but all I could see was a great black cloud hanging over Aradel. I sent a warning to Gratian, but no one knew quite what to make of it. Anyway, one does not change the future by divining bits of it. What will be, will be. As it was, Merra only barely escaped death at Celadon."

"How was that?" Brian asked.

"Well, her mother escaped the butchery at Rondelaine only because she was of the Dryads. When poor Cerid saw her husband and the others die, and realized that all was lost, she made herself invisible and escaped to the tower where she kept her records. Within minutes, by using a formula, she was at Celadon talking to Benedict and the king."

Nysa paused and shook her head. "It was terrible news to bring to a sick old man. The shock of it killed Gratian, but not before he had given her the sword, and ordered her to hide it where no man could find it."

"So *that*'s why she hid it in the future!" Brian said.

"That, and the fact that she had just finished a formula that would take her there. I think the sword would have been just as safe if she'd hidden it here under the hill. But Cerid was in a state of shock herself, and at the moment I suppose all she wanted was to get as far away as possible."

"What happened to Merra at Celadon?" he asked.

"I'm getting to that," Nysa told him. "Before Cerid left to hide the sword—she had to leave from here, because this spot is used as a base for all calculations—she put the written formula in that little silver box for me to keep. When she returned three days later, she couldn't wait to go on to Celadon and see Merra. But Celadon had been destroyed."

"Destroyed!" Brian echoed.

"Yes. Within hours of Gratian's death. And according to the peasants, every soul there killed—by men-at-arms Albericus had already sent there before taking Rondelaine."

"But you escaped," he said to Merra.

She nodded, biting her lip. "Uncle Benedict managed to get us away," she said. "No one can touch him with a sword. We reached the forest, and hid. Then, since there was nowhere else to go at the time, we started for here. It took us days and days. That was five years ago, when I was too young to use a formula properly. Poor Mother, she thought I was dead …"

"Cerid was heartbroken when she came back here," Nysa added. "With Gratian and his entire family gone, she thought that was the end of Aradel. And without Gerald and Merra, she was through with life here. So it was only natural that she

would want to follow her husband to the next world."

Brian watched a tear roll down Merra's pale cheek. He had the curious feeling that she, without realizing it, had said something about her escape that was very important to him, but he could not think what it was.

Finally he looked at Nysa, and asked, "Did Cerid say anything about the sword before she—before she left?"

Nysa thought a moment. "Why, yes. She was so discouraged about Aradel, she said that since there was no one left who had a right to the sword, perhaps it would be better if it remained hidden forever."

Brian stared at her. Again he had the feeling that he had heard something of great importance. He sat down on a stool, trying to sift it out. But before the answer came he suddenly saw another truth.

"It was Cerid who took the formula!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "Can't you see? She thought Aradel was lost, and that everyone was dead who might have saved it, even Brother Benedict. So—so she decided the formula had better be destroyed."

Nysa turned stricken eyes upon him. Slowly she nodded. "Of course! It had to be that way. Poor Cerid … she was so discouraged …"

Merra put her hands over her face and sobbed. Finally she managed to whisper, "What—what are we going to do now?"

Brian swallowed. "I don't know," he muttered. "But if that sword can be found, I'm going to find it. There *must* be a way."

For a while they were held in an unhappy silence. Finally Nysa murmured, "What we need is tea. Perhaps it will help us to think."

Brian watched as she crouched by the hearth and placed twigs and small faggots upon the dark coals of the old fire. The last spark seemed to be out and he wondered how she was going to make it burn. But she merely waved her slender hands over it, snapped her fingers once, and bright flame rose from the coals. Soon the kettle hanging from its crane was singing merrily, and she made tea from a collection of herbs kept in jars on a shelf.

It was a spicy, thought-stirring drink, and Brian's mind was working swiftly before he had finished half a cup.

"I have an idea," he said abruptly.

"So have I," said Merra. "But let us hear yours first, Sir Brian. Mine is complicated, and I—I'd rather not try it if yours is easier."

"Well, mine shouldn't be too hard. Have you a formula that will take us to Rondelaine?"

"Of course. We used it often in the past."

"What part of the castle will it carry us to?"

"The highest part. The top of the little watch-tower that rises above the main tower."

"Is that the same tower where your mother kept her records?"

"Why—why, yes! I see what your idea is. There are only two rooms in the tower, and hers was the upper one. It's a tiny place, just big enough for a cabinet, a stool, and a little table where she did her calculations. She—she liked to work there because it was so hidden away that no one ever disturbed her."

"Have you been there since—since she—"

Merra shook her head. “Not to the room. But I was in the tower only a few weeks ago to leave a message. I—I may as well tell you, Sir Brian—if you haven’t already guessed—we’ve been organizing the peasants so we’ll have an army to follow the sword. If we ever find it …”

“We’ll find it. Now tell me: It’s been five years since your mother used the room. Do you think there’s a chance her notes and records will still be there?”

“I don’t see why not. It’s an awfully big place, Rondelaine, and the little room is way up high where hardly anyone ever goes. There are so many stairs to climb that Mother always went there by formula from her apartment. Anyway, anyone who went into the room wouldn’t pay much attention to a pair of old account books full of figures and symbols.”

Brian stood frowning, rubbing his bony knuckles against the hard line of his jaw. Because of a certain grimness in his face and his thick shock of unusually pale hair, he looked at that moment more like a young Viking marauder than a former stableboy. Suddenly he said, “What is the hour?”

Nysa, who was just beginning to dim, closed her eyes for a second and replied, “The sun is halfway down the sky. You have four hours till darkness.”

“Then there is time enough. Let us go to Rondelaine.” He looked at Merra. “How do we manage it?”

“Wait!” said Nysa, all at once becoming sharply visible again. “It will be much safer if I go to Rondelaine instead of you two. They can see you. But I can go everywhere without anyone even suspecting …”

“No, please,” Merra said quickly, shaking her head. “We’ll be safe enough. Besides, this is a good chance to show Sir Brian how we travel. He should know a little about it before we start for the sword.”

“Oh, very well. I suppose you are right. But he should take his weapon, just to get used to carrying it, and it ought to be in a scabbard. Wait a minute.”

Nysa hurried up the stairway, and returned presently with a very old and beautiful scabbard, intricately engraved, and with a band of great amethysts set in gold around the top.

At the sight of it, Brian whistled softly. “That must have belonged to a king!”

“It has belonged to many kings,” she told him. “For generations this scabbard has held the true sword of Aradel. Cerid was forced to leave it behind because she was too small to wear it. The scabbard and the sword together would have been too difficult for her to carry.”

Reverently he buckled it about his waist, as high as he could, and found he was just tall enough to keep the golden tip from dragging on the floor. The new sword fitted into it easily.

“The scabbard has a power of its own,” Nysa went on. “It comes from the jewels. Draw the sword, and you will see what I mean.”

Brian’s hand went to the hilt. The moment his fingers touched it, the sword, in spite of its length and weight, seemed to leap from the scabbard as if propelled by a spring. He was even more astounded when he raised it, for it had entirely lost its feeling of heaviness.

“Have no fear of it,” Nysa said. “The lighter it seems to the hand, the harder the blade will strike.” She turned to Merra. “Take him into the hill and show him how we travel by formula. And do be watchful!”

Merra called to Tancred, and with the nightingale on her shoulder she led the

way into the curving passage beyond the little alcove. It soon widened into a broad cavelike room with a smooth stone floor. The floor was covered with large circles drawn with chalk. These were more than an arrow's length across, and each was filled with a design made of different geometric figures. Numbers and symbols filled the spaces between the circle and the enclosed design.

"These are departure points," said Merra, indicating the circles. "Each one will take you to a different place. From here you can go to the abbey, the village, Celadon, and any of the main towns and castles of Aradel." She pointed to a circle enclosing a hexagon. "If we stand in the center of that one, and repeat the right formula, it will take us to another circle in the top of the little tower at Rondelaine."

"How do we get back?"

"We'll stand in the circle in the tower, I'll say the formula in reverse, and we'll land in the larger circle over yonder."

"I see." He frowned at the large circle, then stared at a much bigger one in the corner beyond it. It was the largest of all, containing circles within circles, and an intricate design of triangles in the center. "What's that big one for?"

Merra bit her lip, and said almost in a whisper, "It is the one we will use when we leave to find the true sword."

At the thought, a little shiver of uneasiness went up his spine. He was still wondering what trials the fates had in store for them when she drew him into the circle with the hexagon. He was ordered to stand back to back with her and and clasp her hands tightly.

"Don't *dare* let go," she cautioned. "It could break the power that holds us, and only heaven knows what would happen then. Now, ready?"

"Ready."

"Then close your eyes and don't open them till I tell you to."

Dutifully he closed his eyes, and she began a curious chant that started with numbers and finished with a rhyme:

> "By all my right, and power bright,
> Transport us to that highest height
> Where Cerid fled when all were slain,
> That dreadful day at Rondelaine."

At the final word he felt a sudden giddiness, as if he were whirling and flying apart, then abruptly he seemed to come down hard on his heels. Instinctively he opened his eyes. It was several seconds before she told him he could do so, and he was in time to glimpse the inside of their landing place as if it were made of things transparent and not fully formed. Then he heard Merra's voice, and the heavy masonry solidified and he saw they were in the center of a small covered tower. The thick wall was slitted all around for the convenience of archers. Directly in front of him a narrow stairway twisted downward.

Brian had had a secret fear that the tower would be occupied when they arrived. It was, but only by dozens of nesting sparrows that flew off in sudden alarm, chirping loudly. The sparrows worried him.

He said to Merra, "Anyone seeing those birds will wonder what's going on up here. We'd better get busy."

She nodded and sent Tancred down the winding stairs to keep watch. But in

spite of the need for haste, she could not resist a glance through one of the long arrow slits at the sprawling majesty of Rondelaine.

"Oh, it was so wonderful here once," she said softly. "Everyone was happy, even the poorest peasant. There were parties out on the terrace above the courtyard, and we used to watch the archery contests and the peasant dances below. In the evenings there would be the minstrels to play and sing, and troubadours from Lombardy and Aquitaine to recite their poetry and bring us news of the world …"

Her voice faded, and he was all at once aware of the dismal tolling of the chapel bell. It reminded him that a tyrant was dead, and that thousands of lives would depend upon the finding of Cerid's formula.

He started to draw her to the stairway, but suddenly she seized his arm and pointed.

"Look! Look!" she whispered tensely. "Coming into the courtyard!"

He peered over her head and across another tower at the great arched and battlemented entrance in the outer wall. The drawbridge had been lowered over the moat, and moving slowly into view on weary horses were a dozen men-at-arms and their attendants. In their midst was a motionless figure on a stretcher.

"That can't be Albericus returning," he muttered. "He couldn't possibly get here before dark. But I'm sure those are some of the men he had with him at the abbey this morning."

"And who is that wounded one they are escorting, Sir Brian?"

"How should I know? Anyhow, I can't make out his face from here."

The hint of a giggle came from her. "Do you really have to, Sir Brian?"

"Huh? You—you don't mean that's Rupert! Why, I didn't—"

"But you did, noble sir. You really clouted the wretch. I talked with Uncle Benedict earlier, and he said you'd given the upstart such a blow that his head is broken, which will probably keep him addled for life. And a good thing, I say. Now let us to Cerid's room."

He followed her down the narrow stairway to the first landing. In front of the small, blackened door she hesitated, lip caught between her teeth, then gave it a trial push. The door swung inward at an angle, held by a single hinge.

With the sudden movement a large flock of nesting birds flew up, making a great racket, and streamed out of the window from which a shutter had burned. The room was a blackened mess. Everything in it that was burnable had been piled together on the stone floor and set afire. Bird nests, feathers, and bits of straw covered most of the wreckage.

For a moment Merra stood stricken, then with a little cry she darted to the burned pile and began pawing through it frantically. She stopped abruptly and drew forth a tooled and gilded corner of burned leather that had once been the cover of a fine book.

"Oh, no!" she gasped.

"What is it?" Brian asked.

"Cerid's Bible. It—it was specially done for her by Brother Meritus, who used to be the scribe at St. Martin's. It took him five years to copy it and make the illuminations. Oh, it was such a beautiful book! And—and she more than treasured it because it was a gift from Alain and Andrea, her best friends."

"Who were Alain and Andrea?"

She turned and looked at him strangely a moment, tears streaming down her face. “Alain was Gratian’s son. He—he was the prince of Aradel. Andrea was his princess.” Then in a broken whisper she added, “And Albericus killed them—and my father, too!”

All at once she jumped up, her face contorted, and screamed, “That rotten beast! That animal! I’ll claw his eyes out! I’ll bind him to that post by the bridge and burn him and burn him and burn him!”

He did not know what post she meant till he raised his eyes and looked out of the window. It gave him a view of part of the drawbridge across the moat, and of a great iron post set in the ground just beyond it. All about the post were the heaped bones of the gaunt monk’s victims. His hands clenched, and a terrible rage mounted in him.

“I’ll settle with Albericus,” he ground out. “Sword or no sword, I’ll settle with him.”

A sudden flutter of wings and a bird’s quick cry made him turn. Only now did he become aware that a frantic Tancred must have been trying to gain their attention, and had been forced to fly all the way up from below.

“Oh, Tancred,” Merra whispered. “I—I’ve been so upset I didn’t hear you. What—”

Brian silenced her with a warning finger, and swung to the doorway. He could make out the soft scrape of stealthy footsteps mounting the stairs.

5
A Spell Is Cast

IT WAS TOO LATE TO RUN AND ATTEMPT TO reach the upper part of the tower without being seen. Nor was it possible to fasten and secure the fire-wrecked door. Their only chance, Brian reasoned, was to put up a big pretense and act as if they had every right to be here.

He stepped boldly out on the landing, hands on hips, and looked arrogantly down at the man on the stairway. After his years at St. Martin's, the ways of the high and mighty were not hard to imitate.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you doing up here?"

The fellow halted and looked up at him with little cold, beady eyes. He was redheaded and thin-lipped, and something about him reminded Brian of the righteous and utterly unfeeling prior back at the abbey. With his plain sword and short hauberk of chain mail he might have been a squire or one of the castle guards.

The beady eyes narrowed and chilled. "I'll ask the questions," the man said harshly. "Just what are *you* doing here?"

"That is no concern of yours!" Brian snapped, trying hard to hide his growing uneasiness. "Nor is this any time to be annoying visitors to Rondelaine. Back to your post—or you'll be reported!"

"Then you would have to report to me," came the cold retort. "I am captain of the guard."

Merra, who had come out on the landing, suddenly stamped her foot and cried, "Fie on you, you unmannered wretch! That is no way to talk to the son of a nobleman! Be gone with you! Be gone!"

The man's face hardened. "I don't like the looks of you two. You are not what you seem. You are evil." He paused, then said gratingly, "If you are not evil, how did you get up there? Answer me that!" He shook a long, crooked finger at them accusingly. "Only days ago the lord Albericus, praise God, discovered that this part of Rondelaine was still contaminated. It reeked with the rot of those sinful books we found up there! They belonged to that foul brood we destroyed. So we burned them—and locked the tower door. We wanted no foot in the place till it could be properly cleansed in the eyes of God."

The guard paused. His thin lips turned down, and again he shook his accusing finger. "So, how did you get up here? Did you fly, like the birds you frightened off? Don't deny it. I know what you are. I can spot evil a league away. Evil is for burning. The stake cries for it!"

The accusing finger made the sign of the cross, and abruptly the hand it was attached to drew the heavy sword buckled about the hauberk. Grimly the guard started on up the stairway. "You will submit and come with me peacefully," he said, "or I will cut you down. The choice is yours. Either way you will be

burned."

Only mounting fury prevented Brian from retreating. The guard, obviously an experienced fighter, had the great advantage of strength and weight, as well as the protection of a coat of mail. But as Brian's hand closed over the hilt of his own sword, causing it to fairly leap from the scabbard, he was determined to draw blood—as much of it as possible.

"Run!" he said urgently to Merra. "Get back to Nysa. I'll hold this murdering wretch!"

Merra vanished behind him. He did not chance taking his eyes from the guard to watch her, for the fellow was only a short distance away, coming up swiftly. He had a momentary urge to step backward and give himself more room, but realized just in time that it would be a mistake. Instead he took a quick step forward to stand braced at the top of the stairway, dominating it and placing the oncoming fighter at a disadvantage. The sword, which had felt so heavy early in the day, now seemed light as a feather from the power it had drawn from the scabbard. He was able to whirl it in front of him with a speed and ease that the strongest of men would have found impossible to equal.

Brian saw the little glittering eyes of the man widen at the sight of the flying blade, and he anticipated a sudden frenzied attack to cut through his guard. When it came he was ready. A deft turn of his wrist deflected the other's weapon. Another quick turn slashed open and wrecked the man's arm and hand, and sent the sword the hand would never hold again clattering down the stairs. An instant later a double handful of soot and ashes was flung into the staring and incredulous eyes. With it went the unleashed fury of Merra's tongue. The fellow howled, lost his balance, and went tumbling after the sword.

Brian turned and saw Merra, her small hands soiled with the ashes of the burned books. "I told you to get back to Nysa!" he said accusingly. "Why didn't you? If he'd cut me down, he would have caught you!"

"Oh, fiddle! You ought to know I wouldn't desert you in trouble! Besides, I knew very well you'd give the wretch a treatment as sound as you gave that stupid Rupert. I merely thought I'd hasten it with the ashes—but your sword is faster than I thought. Why, I could hardly believe it!"

"I could hardly believe it myself," he admitted. "But of course it has drawn its power from the scabbard. Which makes me wonder: If the scabbard can do this to an ordinary blade, what would it do to the true sword?"

Her green eyes flashed up at him curiously. "Sir Brian, you forget one thing—your own ability."

"I—I don't understand. All I know is what your uncle taught me."

"Oh, don't be so blind! Don't you realize by now that you were born with a special power of your own? Young as you are, if you had the true sword, no one could stop you. Why, my uncle told me—"

She paused suddenly, listening. From somewhere below Brian could make out, for the first time, the hoarse, agonized voice of the wounded guard, crying for help. And help must be coming, for he could faintly hear the answering calls of hurrying men.

"We'd better leave!" he muttered.

Catching Merra by the arm, he drew her swiftly up the stairs to the top of the tower. Quickly he sheathed his sword, and they stood back to back in one of the

faint circles drawn on the floor, her small hands clasped tightly in his. Tancred fluttered down and perched on her shoulder.

"Ready?"

"Ready!"

As she began her curious chant he could hear voices growing louder below, then the clink and clatter of arms as men started upward. Finally came Merra's rhyme:

> "By right of blood and all my power,
> Take us from this blackened tower;
> Take us fast as fast can be!
> Take us home to Nysa's tree!"

Just in time he remembered to close his eyes. On the instant came the sudden giddiness, the feeling of whirling and flying apart, and the abrupt landing on his heels.

When he opened his eyes—which he was careful not to do too soon—they were back in the cavelike area they had started from earlier. He knew they had been away only a matter of minutes, though it seemed they had been gone for hours.

As they stepped from the landing circle, he was startled to hear the voice of the invisible Nysa just ahead of him.

"Heaven be praised!" she said thankfully. "As soon as you were gone I had a terrible feeling about Rondelaine. You had trouble?"

"Yes," said Merra. "But Sir Brian's sword took care of it."

"I prayed that it would. And the formula—you could not find it?"

Merra's lip trembled. "It—it was burned. Everything in the room was burned." Suddenly her soiled hands became little fists beating at the air. "They even burned Cerid's Bible! The rotten wretches! Oh, I'll make them pay! I'll burn *them!* I'll burn them all! If it's the last thing I do—"

"Now, Merra."

Nysa's voice, softly reproving, brought sudden silence. "I know how you feel, my dear," she went on, shimmering so that all at once she became visible to Brian. "But vengeance is not the way of the Dryads. Of course, Albericus and many others must die—it cannot be avoided. Only remember: We fight not for vengeance, but to save Aradel."

"Oh, fie!" Merra burst out. "You are right—but how can I help hating? It's awful to be so—so helpless!"

Nysa gave a sad little sigh. "Then keep your hate. Maybe you will need it for what lies ahead. It will take more than courage to find the true sword."

She paused, then said, "Now, you had an idea of your own about the formula. Is it the same thought I have—to get Benedict's help?"

"Yes. But you'll have to go and get him, because I haven't the power to bring him. He's too big."

"Very well. I'll go for him. I know Benedict will do his best, but I can see certain difficulties. It may not even work."

Merra swallowed. "It's *got* to work. It's our only chance."

"We'll see. Call to him and tell him I'm on my way."

While Merra closed her eyes in concentration, Brian watched the slender Nysa

move quickly to one of the departure circles and begin a rapid chant. So soft was her voice that he could not distinguish the words, and it surprised him when she abruptly vanished without the preliminary shimmering he had expected.

It was long minutes before Merra opened her eyes. Afterward she stood frowning and biting her lip, obviously upset about something.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Everything! Uncle Benedict is not at the abbey, and on top of it the peasants —" She shook her head and looked ruefully at her soiled hands. "Let's clean up and find something to eat, and I'll tell you about it. It—it's sort of complicated."

After they had washed outside by the crystal pool, Merra made tea at the fireplace just as Nysa had, and set out black bread and cheese from the cupboard. It startled Brian to see her start the fire for the tea, for she merely waved her small hands once over the coals, snapped her fingers, and the bright flame rose as quickly as it had for her aunt.

"How do you manage to get a fire going the way you and Nysa do it?" he asked, after they had begun to eat.

"Oh, it's simple enough," she said with a little shrug. "Mother was even better at it than we are. She could make anything burn. You just have to think a certain way, and sparks fly when you snap your fingers. I only wish it was as easy to become invisible, like the rest of the Dryads. I know how, but the best I can do is to fade out for just a few seconds. Then it takes all the strength I have. It makes me so mad!"

"Maybe you're not old enough yet."

"That could be. It does take lots of power, especially for someone like myself. I mean, it's natural for me to be visible, so I have to manage it just opposite from the way Nysa does. Anyway, I—I'd feel a lot better about going after the true sword if I could vanish easily whenever I wanted to, the way Cerid could."

"Sure, it would be a help," he admitted. "But the main thing is to get to wherever it is. What I don't understand is why you think Brother Benedict can help us. You need a formula—but what does he know about it?"

"He knows how to cast a spell," she said quietly.

"A—a spell?" He stared at her.

"Yes. A spell. He's very skilled at it."

"But how is casting a spell going to produce the formula?"

"If he can put Nysa under a spell, he can send her mind over to—to where Cerid has gone and get the formula direct from her."

He stared at her again, incredulously. "Why, I—I never heard of such a thing!"

"There's much you haven't heard of," she retorted, giving a faint sniff. "Uncle Benedict was rather lax in your education. Anyway," she admitted, "Nysa is afraid it won't work. No one has ever put a spell on one of the Dryads. After all, we do have very peculiar minds."

"You certainly do have," he affirmed. "Now suppose Nysa's right, and a spell won't work with her. What then?"

"But it's *got* to work!" she wailed. "It's just *got* to!"

Brian sighed and rubbed his jaw in doubt, then studied her curiously out of the corner of his eye. With her little-girl looks and grown-up mind, her golden braids and changeable green eyes—slanting green eyes that could be full of mischief

one moment, or brimming with tears or blazing with rage the next—she was the strangest person he had ever known.

Finally he asked, “What was this trouble you were going to tell me about?”

With the question, her mood changed on the instant. Suddenly she gave one of her gay little laughs. “The news is out about you! Sir Brian, how would you like to become a nobleman?”

Something in him recoiled at the thought. “I’d rather be myself,” he retorted. “Don’t forget, my father was a woodcutter. Only hours ago I was a stableboy, until you knighted me—and I still think you were having fun at my expense. Anyway, knights earn their rank—but not those born with titles. They’re all so—so worthless. The abbey school was full of that sort. Spoiled and rotten! They called themselves my betters, and I despised them all!”

“Oh, dear me!” she exclaimed, rolling her eyes. “Then you don’t want to become a nobleman?”

“No! I just want to be myself.”

She sniffed. “That’s really too bad. Because already the peasants are going quite wild about you. All they can talk about is the stableboy at St. Martin’s who cracked Rupert’s pate, and left Aradel without a ruler. La-de-de! Their leaders are having a secret meeting right now in the woods behind the village. They think you’ve got truly marvelous powers—already they’re calling you a count or something. They’re willing to march on Rondelaine immediately if you’ll lead them!”

His jaw dropped.

“Well?” she said, something devilish glinting in her eyes.

“Is this the truth?” he demanded.

“As heaven is my witness, Sir Brian. I got it straight from Uncle Benedict, who is there talking to them now.” She shook her head in mock sadness. “And still you don’t want to be a nobleman?”

“Never! But tell your uncle I’d lead them this very evening if I had the true sword—which we must have for victory—and that they can count on me the moment I get it.”

Her laugh tinkled again. “He’s already told them that, Sir Brian. And he’s busy begging them to hold off for at least two days while they gather more men. By that time you’ll have the sword.”

“Two days,” he muttered. “Can we really find the sword and be back by then?”

“It didn’t take Cerid any time to hide it.” Then she caught her breath. “We can surely find it if—if Nysa gets the formula for us this evening.”

“Where is she now?”

“Waiting for him at one of our landing points at the edge of the village. She ought to be able to bring him here in just a little while.”

He grunted and rubbed his knuckles across his jaw. The hint of deviltry, he noticed, was still in her eyes.

“What is it about me that amuses you so?” he asked finally.

“Oh, I was just thinking what a silly goose you are!”

“A goose, am I?”

“Of course! Imagine a peasant not wanting to be a nobleman!” She rolled her eyes. “For if you were one—though I’d prefer one truly born, in spite of what you said about them—you’d be able to marry me when I’m older. But naturally,” she

added smugly, “I cannot marry too far beneath my station.”

“No? And what is your—your station?”

She sniffed and lifted one shoulder. “My father was a duke. That makes me a princess.”

“A—a princess!”

“Yes,” she said loftily. “And a highly ranking one at that. For I am destined, in due time, to become queen of Aradel.”

He managed to close his jaws with a snap to keep from gaping at her. Suddenly he said accusingly, “You’re just like a cat with a mouse! Always having fun at my expense! Can’t you be serious with me? And—and truthful?”

On the instant her expression changed. “I’m sorry, Sir Brian. You are very important to me, and if I didn’t like you, I wouldn’t tease you. Look at me! What do you see?”

He stared at her. All hint of mischief had left her face. It startled him to realize she was extraordinarily pretty.

“I—I see a—” he began.

“You see a little girl,” she interrupted. “But inside I am old. I was born with knowledge it will take you more long years to learn. Some of the things I know are hard to live with—especially now. But when I tease you and have fun, they—they’re easier to bear.”

She paused, and said slowly, “I really am a ranking princess, and it is quite true that I am destined to become the queen—but only if I survive until my next birthday.” She raised her green eyes and looked steadily at him. “Can you guess when it is?”

He swallowed, for it suddenly hit him. “Don’t tell me it’s two days from now!”

“Yes. At this very hour. Two days from now, at this hour, either we will return from our search, bringing the true sword—or—or we will be dead.”

“No!”

“Yes, Sir Brian. We cannot escape our fate, whatever it is. And your fate, strange to say, is closely bound with mine.”

For a while he could only stare at her, unable to speak. Finally he stammered, “Then—then you must know all about me! E-everything!”

“Yes.”

“E-even my destiny?”

“As much of it as I know of mine.”

He ran his tongue over suddenly dry lips. “Then—then tell me—”

Before he could finish—and it was only one of a dozen questions that had been burning for answers—she gave a little cry of relief and sprang abruptly to her feet.

“They’re here!”

Brian had heard nothing, but when he rose and turned he saw the burly figure of Brother Benedict approaching in the passageway. Nysa, a vague shimmering at his side, took form as they entered the room.

A big hand clasped Brian fondly on the shoulder. It was a brief touch, for the monk’s face was tired and more than usually grim. “It is all arranged,” he said. “We have two days. And because time is so short, every minute is precious. But first, before we go to work, let us give thanks to the Almighty for this moment when the four of us are at last together, and ask for His help in what lies ahead.”

They bowed their heads while Brother Benedict gave a short prayer. Afterward he told Nysa to sit at the table, and ordered Merra to bring ink, quills, some pieces of vellum to write upon, and a candle. The candle was placed in the center of the table, and Brian and Merra were told to sit on one side and carefully record everything Nysa said.

When all was ready, the monk glanced at Merra and ordered quietly, “Light the candle, my dear.”

Merra reached across the table, passed a small hand over the candle, and snapped her fingers. A point of flame rose from the wick.

Now Brother Benedict settled his sturdy bulk on a bench and faced Nysa across the table. “Look directly at the candle,” he told her. “Do not take your eyes from it or think of a thing.”

Brian, watching curiously, wondered what would happen next. Was this how one was placed under a spell? Somehow he had expected something quite different.

“You are going to sleep,” Brother Benedict was saying softly to Nysa, his voice as soothing as Brian had ever heard it. “Your eyes are getting heavy. You cannot keep them open. You are going to sleep. Sleep … Sleep …”

Nysa’s eyes were closed now. Her delicate body relaxed, and her breathing became slower and deeper. She began to fade, slowly.

“You are going beyond the candlelight,” Brother Benedict continued. “Into the world where Cerid went. When you reach it, call to Cerid, and she will come to you.”

Nysa faded completely. Out of the corner of his eye Brian caught a glimpse of Merra’s taut face, her lower lip caught tightly between her teeth. They waited. The room became so quiet he could hear, high overhead, the vague movements of the great tree’s gnarled old limbs in the evening breeze.

Suddenly from the empty chair across the table came a whisper of sound. All at once the invisible Nysa gave a little cry.

“Oh, Cerid! You are here!”

6
Journey at Dawn

BRIAN WAS SCARCELY ABLE TO BELIEVE WHAT followed. He heard only Nysa's voice, but it was a suddenly gay and laughing sound as she talked rapidly to a sister she had not seen in years. That Cerid was with her, and speaking just as fast, he had no doubt; but nothing she said was audible.

This curious meeting was interrupted by Brother Benedict. "The formula!" he said tersely. "Get it from her before your connection weakens. You haven't much time!"

As Nysa's voice changed and became questioning, the monk turned his head and said quickly, "Have your quills ready, you two. Don't miss a word—here it comes!"

It came abruptly, fast. At least it seemed fast to Brian, for he had had no experience taking dictation, and it was only with the greatest difficulty that he was able to jot down the words and numbers before they escaped him. Several times Brother Benedict interrupted Nysa and called for a careful repeat. Then, as the swift seconds passed, it was evident that the connection between the sisters was weakening, for now it was Nysa who was asking for repeats, and who seemed to be finding it hard to distinguish Cerid's words.

"Get details on the sword!" Brother Benedict ordered abruptly, when Nysa's voice died. "Where did she leave it? With whom? Get the location!"

Nysa tried, but little of it seemed intelligible to Brian as he hurriedly wrote it down. Finally Nysa, whose voice seemed to be coming from a great distance, said unhappily, "It is over. Cerid is fading from me and I can no longer hear her."

"Very well," said Brother Benedict. "You may now return from beyond the candlelight. At the count of five you will become visible again, then you will awaken and remember all you saw and heard."

The monk counted slowly. When he reached five, there was a sudden shimmering in the empty chair, and a sleepy Nysa appeared and opened her eyes.

She blinked at them and shook her head as if she had been dreaming, then abruptly sat up straight. "Oh!" she gasped. "Oh, dear!" Suddenly, as if vividly recalling what she had experienced, she put her slender hands over her face and cried.

"Now, now," Brother Benedict purred, hurrying over to her and petting her as he would a child. "I'm sorry, my dear. If it wasn't absolutely necessary for you to help us, I would have blanked out your memory. I know this is hard …"

"It—it's all right, Benedict," Nysa answered. "It was such a shock to suddenly be with Cerid and actually talk to her, then to have a sort of curtain come between us. And such a gorgeous place! Such flowers!"

"I didn't expect it to be a bog with vipers," the monk said dryly. "Now, here's

what you must do: Take Merra's quill and some vellum, and write down the formula as you remember it—and everything Cerid told you about the sword. While you are doing that, we'll be comparing our two copies."

Merra's copy, Brian saw, was far better than his own. Both copies, however, had gaps in them, though not always in the same place. Brother Benedict placed the two copies side by side, studied them carefully, and filled in most of the doubtful spots by substituting words from one copy or the other. Finally, when Nysa finished her version of what Cerid had said, the monk used it for additional corrections.

"Now we're getting somewhere," he told them. "We cannot be far off."

Merra shook her head. "Uncle Benedict," she began in a strained voice, "this isn't a formula for traveling in Aradel. One little mistake in the figures might not matter too much here—so long as we didn't have to worry about heights. But—but—don't you see? When we go after the sword, we'll be traveling through *time."*

"I do understand, Merra," her uncle said. "The formula *must* be absolutely correct. And I'm convinced that the four of us can come up with a copy that is. It's just a matter of remembering what we heard, and carefully going over and over—"

"I—I've an idea," Brian interrupted. "Why don't we make the most perfect copy we can, and then you place Nysa under another spell and—and send her back to Cerid for corrections?"

"There isn't time," he was told. "What you don't realize is that it has taken a great deal of energy to contact Cerid this evening. Not only mine, but Nysa's. She's depleted. It will be another full day before she can build up reserve enough to try it again. Then it may be too late."

"I see."

"The thought frightens me, son. We've been working on the peasant groups for a long time, getting them secretly organized. What happened today set them off in a way that nothing else could. They're suddenly wild to fight. It took all my power of persuasion to get them to hold off for two days. If we fail to have the sword by then, they'll attack Rondelaine on their own—and they'll be slaughtered. They rose against Albericus not long after he came, when they had no sword to follow and no leadership. Many hundreds died."

"Was that when my father, Harle, was killed?"

"Yes."

Brian's jaw hardened. "I'll make Albericus pay if it's the last thing I do. Let's go over these copies again."

Hours later Nysa called a halt. "It is past midnight," she said. "We've been through an incredible day, and this is much too important for us to struggle over it and risk making mistakes when we are tired. Let us get some rest, and go over it again in the morning."

Brother Benedict, his broad scarred face drawn with fatigue, rolled up in one of the blankets Nysa tossed down the stairs, and went almost instantly to sleep on the floor near the fireplace. Brian chose the other side near the curious and undefined door that seemed to open only to a rhyme.

He was awakened long later when someone stepped carefully over him, and he

heard the door rhyme being softly whispered. But before he could sit up and see who it was, the door had opened and closed again.

Brian rubbed sleep from his eyes and frowned at the place where the door had closed. Suddenly he glanced behind him, but Brother Benedict was still swaddled in a blanket, at peace with the world. Then he noticed that Tancred's perch was empty.

Brian knew he ought to go back to sleep and get all the rest he could. Then he realized sleep would be impossible. Finally, as if drawn by a string, he found himself standing before the door area, whispering the rhyme. When the door opened, he slipped quickly out into the night.

After an uncertain step or two in the blackness he paused, listening to the song of a nightingale while he waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Was that Tancred singing? It almost had to be, for it was the only birdsong he could hear, and the singer couldn't be more than a dozen paces away.

When he could make out the dim trunks of the trees, he began moving cautiously around the edge of the spring. Dawn was much closer than he'd thought, for little patches of graying sky were showing through the black canopy of leaves overhead.

All at once he stopped, shaken by the discovery that he was hearing far more than a nightingale's song. For behind it, joining in, rose a soft and lovely chorus that seemed to come from many silvery voices singing all through the ancient grove. He stood listening, hardly believing his ears.

"Isn't it beautiful, Sir Brian?"

He could not see Merra, and before his fumbling tongue could form a reply, she went on gaily, "I willed for you to come out. If you hadn't, I would have awakened you. All my friends are singing to us while Tancred leads. For the Dryads know we are leaving with the dawn and they are wishing us well."

"But—but—the formula! How—"

"I stayed awake thinking of it, and sent my thoughts to the Dryads. They helped, and now the right numbers have all come together in my mind. Only the last few words are confusing, but they are names of some kind that should help us locate the sword after we arrive. But we will not worry about that now. It is your turn to bathe in the sacred spring."

"Huh? Bathe in it? But—but I've washed in it twice already!"

"Oh, fiddle! That was for the outside. This is for the inside. You silly goose, don't you know there is magic in these waters? Heaven preserve us! But right now we need all the magic we can get. Quickly! Off with your handsome new clothes, and in you go!"

He had no choice but to obey. He stripped off his clothes, crossed himself, and stepped out into the great spring while Tancred and the invisible chorus continued to pour forth their melody in the grove.

Maybe he was just imagining it, but when he turned at last and crawled up on the bank, it seemed that something had brushed all the cobwebs from his brain and that his body had gained the strength of ten.

A towel was flung to him, and Merra called, "Hasten, Sir Brian. Dawn is near!"

The moment he was dressed she appeared from behind a tree, still toweling her golden braids, which she had allowed to become soaked. The darkness had faded slightly and the vague patches of sky overhead were more distinct.

As they hurried toward the great oak, she asked, “Did you wet your head, Sir Brian?”

“Yes.”

“So did I. It sharpens the senses better than Nysa’s tea.” Then, lapsing into English, which she did on occasion: “Thou fearest not what dreadful pass lieth ahead of us this fateful morn?”

“It—it’s only normal to fear the unknown. But I’ve awakened to fear so many times at the abbey that I’ve become used to it.”

“I know. You’ve been beaten, cut and jabbed with swords, flogged … I—I used to cry sometimes when Uncle Benedict told me what they’d done to you. He—he lived in fear that you would be killed, and he watched over you all the time. Yet he told us that what you were going through was for the best. That it would make you tough and strong.”

Merra stopped and caught her lip between her teeth. They had reached Nysa’s tree. Now she looked up, and in a voice that did not sound quite steady, repeated the rhyme for entrance. As she did so, Tancred flew down and alighted on her shoulder. Before Brian could pull his wits together and begin asking questions, they were inside.

Brother Benedict, up but not quite awake, was sitting on a bench frowning uncertainly at Nysa, who was putting food on the table. At the sight of them the monk’s frown deepened, and Nysa began pouring tea.

“You have only a few minutes,” she said. “Sit down and eat. You should eat all you can, for it may be impossible to obtain food until you return.”

“What is all this?” Brother Benedict asked, suddenly coming awake. “Where are they going at this hour, Nysa? What about the formula?”

“The formula has been solved, Benedict. That is, as much as it can be solved until they try it out. Merra was awake most of the night, going over it with our sisters of the grove. It will take her almost to the sword. And it has been decided by everyone that the best time to leave is at dawn, which is almost here.”

“Merciful God!” the monk whispered. He shook his head. “Sit down, you two,” he added. “Eat. And while you are replenishing yourselves, I will pray.” He bowed his head and began to mumble a prayer. It was surprising to see him do this, for he was not a devout man.

Brian sat down near Merra. He drank some of his tea, then looked at the food and shook his head. “I—I’m not hungry.”

“I’m not either,” Merra said. “It would make me sick if I ate anything now.”

Brother Benedict finished his prayer and said quietly, “I have seen men on the eve of battle who could not eat. It is only natural, and perhaps best. But, Nysa, they will need something later. Put bread and cheese in those pouches at their belts.”

Nysa did so. Merra fed Tancred some crumbs, then the nightingale flew up and alighted on her shoulder.

“Are you taking him with you?” Nysa asked.

“Of course! I—I wouldn’t think of going without him.”

There followed a little silence. Suddenly Nysa closed her eyes and said, “I can see crimson showing in the east. It is time.” Tears stained her cheeks as she quickly embraced Merra.

Brian, hastily buckling on his sword, was all at once enclosed in a bear hug by

Merra's uncle.

"Take care of her, son!"

"I will!"

"God bless you both!" The monk thrust them into the passageway that led under the hill. "We will wait here till you return."

Silently Brian followed Merra and Tancred into the cavelike room with the circle-covered floor. A chill went up his spine as his eyes swung to the corner where, years ago, Cerid had drawn the largest circle of all.

Merra, without faltering, moved straight to it and stood near the center with its intricate design of triangles. Brian swallowed and took his place with his back to hers. It was not until he clasped her small cold hands, and felt the tremor in them, that he realized how frightened she was.

"Don't worry," he managed to say. "Everything will be all right. I know it!"

"I—I—you are very brave, Sir Brian. Thank you."

"You are the brave one, your grace."

"Please, I wish you wouldn't address me that way."

"But it is your right! And as long as you call me Sir Brian—"

"That is the way I want it. Later, when we—but the dawn is here. Take a long breath."

He did so.

"Ready, Sir Brian?"

"Ready!"

He closed his eyes and waited. In a low voice she began the curious chant with its many numbers, far more numbers than he had heard her use before. At last she finished with a rhyme:

> "By all my right, and power bright,
> Please take us through the dawning light—
> A thousand years of day and night;
> Please take us to that realm unknown
> Where Cerid fled when hope had flown,
> And hid so well that none can tell
> Where hangs the sword of Aradel."

There came the familiar giddiness, as if he were whirling and flying apart, only it was far worse now than he ever would have dreamed it could be. Abruptly he came down hard on his heels, so hard that he crumpled.

When he opened his eyes he gasped in disbelief.

Merra screamed.

7
Nightmare

FOR TERRIFYING SECONDS BRIAN'S ONLY IMPRESSIONS were of noise and blinding lights, of hordes of hurrying humans, strangely dressed, who were swirling about them, and of impossible mechanisms on wheels that seemed to be charging madly upon them from all directions.

He and Merra had fallen in a tangle on the edge of hard pavement, and for a dazed and bewildered moment he was unable to move or even think. Then the blare of horns and the sudden sharp awareness of the hurtling things on wheels brought him to his senses. He managed to stand up and jerk Merra to her feet, then he pulled her through the moving press of people to what appeared to be the entrance of an incredible building made of glass. It took them out of the human tide and gave them a chance to take stock of this monstrous caldron of another era into which they had tumbled.

Gradually Brian's shock wore off. The size of the place awed him, but everything about it repelled him. He stared blankly at the endless streams of people, wondering where they came from, where they were going. So many, many people! Why did they build their buildings so impossibly high? Why did they jam their streets with those frightening machines? And the lights—he couldn't get over them. It was night here, but the lights made it bright as day. Lights uncounted, garish, flashing, constantly changing color and pattern. And under it all was something he'd never heard before: the sound of a monster city. It was humming, grinding, blaring …

"It—it's like a horrid dream," Merra whispered, her hand clinging tightly to his arm.

"Yes. I can't understand why Cerid ever chose such a place as this."

"She didn't. It was the formula. All she knew was that it would take her safely into the future."

"Do you suppose she landed here, in *this* spot?"

"She must have. Or a place very close."

Brian shook his head. "What a chance she took! She might have been killed."

"Yes, but she hardly cared. You mustn't forget that she was nearly out of her mind with grief. I—I would have run too—just as fast and as far as I could. The Dryads are that way. Bringing the sword and hiding it here was almost—well, I mean she wouldn't have dreamed of doing it ordinarily."

"But—but where around here would she have hidden it?" His eyes followed the soaring lines of the impossible sky-reaching structures that made a deep valley of the street. "Don't tell me she left it in one of *those* places!"

"I—I hope not—and I really don't think so. Remember those words she gave after the formula? There was *docteur le grande*, which we must have heard wrong —"

“I remember. *Docteur* is teacher, and why would she refer to a great teacher? It doesn’t fit. Besides, it’s French.”

“Well, *mouseion* isn’t French, and we all agreed it was what Cerid said and meant. It has to be right, for *mouseion* is a place for the muses—which naturally is where people go to sing or recite poetry, or maybe hear the minstrels and troubadours.”

Brian looked doubtful. “This doesn’t seem to me like a city that cared much for poetry. As for minstrels and troubadours …”

He stopped suddenly and peered around. “What’s happened to Tancred?”

“Don’t worry about him. He flew up when we fell, and he’s off somewhere looking things over. Oh—here he comes!”

The nightingale appeared as she spoke and settled again on her shoulder, making harsh little twitterings as if he did not care for what he had seen. At the same moment a group of oddly dressed youths in sleeveless brown jackets drifted around the corner at the edge of the crowd. There was the hint of a swagger in their movements, but they proceeded warily, their restless eyes seemingly taking in everything around them. Brian, ever watchful, caught sight of them first. Uneasiness shot through him as one of the youths paused abruptly and pointed at Merra.

“Hey, dig the chick wit’ th’ boid!”

Instantly the group crowded close, staring at Tancred while one of them asked questions in a sharp, nasal voice. “What kinda boid’s that? You got ’im trained, huh?”

“Phooey, I don’t dig feathers,” said another. “Lookit the sword this fancy cat’s wearing! It’s got rocks on it!”

“Yeah? An’ who says they’re for real?”

“They’re real enough, Dippy. That thing’s worth bread!”

“Well, whaddaya know!” said the lean one called Dippy. He jabbed a finger at Brian. “Take it off, you! Give!”

Brian stared at him, only half comprehending. Another brown-jacketed youth said, “Wake up, fancy boy! When Dippy says give, you better give, and fast. You dig?”

Brian shook his head, more in confusion than understanding, and was rewarded by a vicious slap followed by the prick of a knife at his throat. It astounded him to realize that he and Merra were actually being attacked by thieves on a busy street, in plain view of scores of people who were passing only a few feet away. No one paid any attention to what was happening; or, if they saw it, they preferred to turn their heads and hurry on.

Even so, his astonishment did not delay his almost instant response to the prick of the knife. He had been drilled in it so many times by Brother Benedict that his reaction was automatic. His head jerked back and to the left as his left hand shot up to knock the weapon aside. At the same moment he kicked his opponent in the stomach with all his strength. Dippy and the knife were propelled backward into the crowd. In perfect timing with the kick, his right hand reached for his sword.

These swift and practiced motions gave him all the room he needed to draw his sword and use it. But just before his fingers touched the hilt, some instinct made him stop. One of the youths abruptly cried, “Here comes a pig!” and the

brown jackets scattered and melted away in the crowd.

Now Brian glimpsed a heavily built man in a visored cap who had just come around the corner. An official or a guard, he guessed, noting the club at the man's belt and the badge on the blue jacket. Was he looking for the thieves who had just disappeared?

Apparently he was, for he stopped and stood scowling at the packed crowd moving past. Finally he shrugged and turned. Merra met his suddenly surprised stare with one of her elfin smiles.

The man grinned. "All dolled up for a party, eh? Some outfits!" Then his eyes widened at the sight of Tancred. "A pet bird! What is he? Some kind of a thrush?"

Brian nodded, mainly to avoid having to speak. He had already decided that the language here was a peculiar form of English. The brown jackets had been almost impossible to understand, but the guard—which he surely must be—was far easier to make out. He wished, though, that the man would go on and not ask questions. Questions could be dangerous.

"A pet thrush!" the guard exclaimed. "Does he sing?"

When she nodded, he asked, "And where would the two of you be going with a pet thrush?"

"To—to the *mouseion*, good sir," she replied, in her English of another age.

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Mouseion. Canst thou direct us whither it lieth?"

"Huh? You must be Quakers. And this mu-mu—Oh, you must mean *museum!* Sure, the Tate Museum is down that way, just across the park." He jerked his thumb toward the intersection across the street. "Better be careful in the park. Stay on the main walk. It's patrolled."

Merra thanked him with a nod and a smile, then gave Brian's sleeve a quick tug and whispered, "Let us go! The light is green."

He had no idea what she meant and immediately balked when she started across the broad street directly in front of the things on wheels. "It is safe to walk on green," she explained hurriedly. "Haven't you been watching the lights at the corners?"

He muttered that there were too many lights, and that thousands of them were constantly changing color. But he had to admire her for her quick thinking, and for noticing what he had missed.

"That place he called a museum," he said, after they had safely reached the far corner and could see trees in the distance. "It couldn't possibly be Cerid's *mouseion*, could it?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to find it and see. Everything is so strange here. And time has turned the English we know into something that hardly makes sense. Anyway, I'm just as certain as I can be that Cerid came in this direction."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Oh, fiddle, you ought to know by now that none of the Dryads would have stayed an instant longer than necessary on that horrid street behind us. If she arrived here in daylight, she would have been able to see the park first thing—and that's where she would go. To be among trees."

"Of course! That makes sense. Do you think she might have hidden the sword in the park?"

"I—I cannot tell yet, Sir Brian. But of this I am sure: Cerid would never, never leave the true sword of Aradel in a place where harm could come to it. It was much too precious to her. Wherever she hid it, it would be in a safe spot."

At the end of their narrow street they waited uneasily for the green light to show, then raced across a busy avenue to the edge of the park. Here a wide graveled path stretched away under the trees. Since it was the only one in sight, and well lighted with the curious globes that seemed to glow as magically as the interior of Nysa's oak, they followed it.

They were not alone, for groups of young people were continually passing them, hurrying toward some unknown attraction ahead. The attraction soon came into view as their path merged with other paths, and suddenly opened upon a brightly lighted area of low buildings beside a small lake. A blare of raucous music drew their attention to an odd, shell-shaped structure at the edge of the trees far to the left. It was filled with musicians. The young people were converging on it, and hundreds more were sprawled on the grass near it.

Brian paused beside the first low building, listening to the weird, tuneless beat of the music. An enticing smell of food came from an open window near him, and through the glass sides of the building he could see people of all ages sitting at tables, eating, and others standing before a counter being served. The unexpected smell and sight of food brought back an appetite that had failed him earlier, but he instantly forgot it as Merra clutched his arm and pointed.

In the distance across the lake, aglow with light, was a beautiful building unlike anything he had seen in the city. It reminded him of a drawing of a Roman temple Brother Benedict had shown him once in the abbey.

"That's it!" Merra whispered. "That's where Cerid hid the sword. I'm sure of it!"

"How can you be so sure? We haven't been in the place yet. We don't even know what it is."

"I don't have to know. I feel it. I am Cerid's daughter, and I know how she felt and thought about everything. The Dryads are that way. The moment she saw that building—"

"You think she knew it was the sort of place she was looking for?"

"Of course! It is a temple of some kind, and a fitting place to hide the sword."

"Then—then let's get over there and have a look at it. If luck is with us …"

"We will need luck," she said uneasily, giving his sleeve a tug. "Something tells me we'd better hurry."

It took them much longer than Brian had thought to go around the end of the lake, and then cross another avenue that lay between the park and their destination.

The temple—for he could not help thinking of it as such—was larger than it had seemed from a distance, and it was reached by a broad series of steps that led to the great marble columns at the entrance. As they started hastily up the steps, a few people were coming down and getting into sleek, wheeled machines at the curb. They were dressed much better than anyone Brian had seen earlier, but he hardly glanced at them. For suddenly the lights behind the columns dimmed, and he realized the place must be closing.

They raced on to the entrance.

Between the columns at the top, two uniformed guards were busy rolling up a long strip of red carpet. Another guard, whose jacket was covered with gold braid, stood haughtily by the door.

Gold Braid looked down his nose at Brian, and said coldly, “The lecture is over.”

“But, good sir, cannot we—”

“Visiting hours for the general public are from nine to five. You will have to come back in the morning.”

Brian turned slowly away. He mumbled to Merra, and they started to go back down the steps, then he noticed a marble bench over in the shadow of the balustrade. He drew her to it, and they sat down wearily.

For a while neither spoke. “Oh, fiddle!” Merra said finally. “Those wretched guards act as if they own the temple! But if we are forced to wait, then wait we will.” She opened the pouch at her belt and took out her bread and cheese, which Nysa had wrapped neatly in a bit of linen.

Seeing her do this, Brian found his own food and started to unwrap it. “How much time do we have before—before your birthday?”

“Thirty-four hours and nearly thirty minutes,” she replied instantly. “Do not worry. There is time enough for—”

She was interrupted by a quick little cry from Tancred. Her hand, raising the bread and cheese to her mouth, suddenly froze. Her eyes widened in disbelief. *“No!”* she gasped. *“No! It cannot be!”*

Brian looked down the long series of steps in the direction she was staring. On the edge of the sidewalk, peering up at the temple, stood a towering figure in a black robe. The face was lost in the shadow of the hood that covered the head, but even without the features there was no mistaking the menacing stance of the figure, the taloned hook of the long hands as if they belonged to some malignant bird of the nether world, or the curiously shaped cross that hung from the golden chain about the waist. By that headless cross alone, shining brightly in the glow of the streetlights, Brian would have known he was looking once more at Albericus.

For long seconds shock held him incapable of movement. How had Albericus managed to get here? How had he learned where the true sword was hidden? As he realized the probable answers—and the awful consequences—his shock changed to a rising fury. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and drew his sword.

But before he could take a step, Merra had leaped in front of him. “No!” she cried. “Leave him alone! You cannot afford—”

“Let me at him!” he said hoarsely. “He’s got to die to save Aradel! Better it happen here—”

“No! No! No!” She fought against him fiercely, holding him back. “You are babbling like an idiot! That creature is a sorcerer—he has powers you know nothing of. Not only that, but he is a great swordsman, second only to my uncle. Has no one told you?”

“I don’t care what he is! I—”

She shook him. “Listen to me! Can you not see that he wears a sword under that black robe? Without the true sword, he is bound to cut you down. Then where will Aradel be?”

Reluctantly he slid his sword back into his scabbard: When he looked down

again at the spot where Albericus had been standing, he was shaken to discover that the black-robed monk had vanished.

"What happened to him?" he asked uneasily. "Where did he go?"

She scanned the street. "I don't know. He's nowhere in sight now. He must—" She broke off with a little cry of dismay.

Brian turned and gaped. A big gray dog was hastily gobbling up the last of their bread and cheese. The dog was on a long leash, the other end of which was dragging, but he was obviously in the charge of a temple guard, who was approaching rapidly.

"Get along, you two!" the guard ordered sharply, as he caught up the end of the leash. "Can't you read signs? You've no business up here after dark! Get along!"

"A murrain seize thee, and a plague of warts!" Merra cried angrily. "Thy greedy beast hath stolen our food!"

Before the astonished guard could find his wits, she caught Brian's hand and they hurried down the steps, then raced across the avenue, which was blessedly without traffic at the moment.

In the park they slowed, and when she spoke again she seemed on the verge of tears. "That horrible dog! And I was practically *starving!* What are we going to do?"

"Buy our supper at that place around the lake. You forget I have the coins Nysa gave me with my clothes."

"Of course! Let us go at once—but I will send Tancred ahead to keep watch for that fiend Albericus. I don't know whether he saw us or not, but I don't want to risk meeting him."

"If he saw us, he'll know he's come to the right place. I'm sure he found Cerid's notes and deciphered them. But even with the formula, how did he manage to use it?"

"I told you he has powers."

At the place where food was sold, Tancred was left outside to keep watch. The enticing smell of food sent Brian's appetite soaring; but inside, standing in line waiting to be served at the counter, his confidence momentarily deserted him. One chose the food one wanted, he quickly learned, from a row of incredibly realistic pictures on the wall. A *burger*, he soon decided, was some kind of meat in a bun, but what were *chips, fries, cokes, shakes, coffee*, and some of the other offerings?

By listening carefully to those ahead of him, he was able to place an understandable order for burgers, fries, and shakes, but ran into trouble when he tried to pay for it all with one of Nysa's coins.

The worldly young woman behind the counter glanced once at his offering and thrust it back. "You trying to be funny, buster? You owe four forty-seven with the tax. Either you fork it over, or—"

"But—but I have given thee gold!" Brian protested. "Dost thou not know the value of gold?"

"Gold, my eye! I know a brass slug when I see it. Whaddaya trying to pull? Charlie, come over here and do something about this kook!"

She was replaced by a bland young man with a heavy mustache who looked at Brian and the coin with raised eyebrows. He shook his head. "If this is supposed

to be a real gold coin, it's a fake. If you haven't any folding money to pay for your order, you'd better scram."

By this time a small crowd had collected at the counter. Suddenly a lean, bald-headed man pressed close and picked up the coin. He studied it with narrowed eyes, then said quietly, "I'll give you twenty dollars for it, son."

Brian had no idea what twenty dollars amounted to, but at a quick nod from Merra the transaction was made. He paid for their order with five of the pieces of paper, received some inferior coins in change, and was given two bags containing their food. It had been his intention to eat at a table, but Merra tugged urgently at his sleeve and he followed her outside.

"We must get away from here, Sir Brian," she said in a rush. "It isn't just the man who bought the gold—he knows it's worth many times what he paid, and he's planning to follow us in the hope of buying more—but it's the others. I can pick up their thoughts. Tancred tells me two of the thieves who tried to take your sword came in behind us to buy food. I did not see them, but Tancred did, and he says they are coming out now to watch where we go. We'd better run!"

They ran. Brian led on a twisting course that took them away from the lighted paths and into the shadows under the trees. Long later, when he was sure no one was close enough to see them, they crept behind a mass of shrubbery and slumped to the grass, breathless and exhausted. The burgers were no longer hot, nor were the shakes very cold, but it hardly mattered. Ambrosia could not have tasted better, and they consumed every scrap.

Merra sighed wearily when she had finished. "I—I didn't know I was so tired. I'm afraid if I close my eyes …"

"Go ahead and close them," he told her. "It's time you rested, for you didn't get much sleep before we came here. Tancred and I will keep watch."

She curled up on the grass and was sound asleep almost on the instant. Brian had every intention of remaining awake, but he did not realize how badly he needed rest himself. When his head began to nod he fought to stay awake. The food he had eaten made it difficult. Finally he made the mistake of closing his eyes.

He was abruptly wakened by the frantic beating of Tancred's wings against his face. Because of the hard and uncertain life he had been forced to lead, he was wide awake and on his feet in seconds, standing at a crouch while his eyes raked the gloom. It took only seconds more to spot the dim figures closing in upon him, and to plan a defense against three knives and a club, and something small in the hand of one that might or might not be a weapon. Then he drew a deep breath, whipped out his sword, and charged.

The whirling blade caught the attacking figures by surprise. There were sudden screams of pain and fright. The knives and the club went flying. A fury of cursing was followed by quick explosions, and something stung his upper arm. Then he saw the cause of it, the last thief on his feet, and he quickly cut him down.

Brian paused, then froze at the sharp sound of whistles. He heard shouts, followed by the pound of approaching feet. Were more thieves coming to help those he'd bested? Now he felt the first stab of fear. But he had Merra to protect, and he clenched his teeth and prepared to charge the new group.

Lights flashed in his face. A man shouted, "Put down that sword, you fool!

We're the police!"

Even then he might have charged, for the word meant nothing to him. But Merra's urgent cry stopped him in time, and he made no resistance when the men with badges closed in on him.

8
Prisoners

BRIAN PROTESTED HOTLY WHEN THEY TOOK HIS sword and equipment away, then became grimly silent when he realized the uselessness of argument. He and Merra were herded to a roadway in the park and forced into the rear of a wheeled machine. After a bewildering ride into the city, they stopped at a towering building and were taken upstairs to a large untidy room full of noise and hurrying people.

His anger broke out anew when a man at a desk began questioning him over and over, and refused to accept his replies. The man was an impatient person with a broad, red face who was called Sergeant Sykes, and he spoke a kind of English so different from his own that understanding was anything but easy.

"We'll start all over again," Sergeant Sykes rapped out. "Now listen carefully. I want your full name, your age, and your father's name and address. Is that clear?"

"But—but I have given thee my name—not once but thrice! It is Brian. Hast thou not ears to hear?"

The broad face of Sergeant Sykes became a darker red. "Cut out that silly lingo and give me a straight answer! I asked for your full name and your address. How long is it going to take you to give it to me?"

Brian glanced at Merra. Her face had tightened with worry and fury. His hands clenched. "What right hast thou to question us and hold us prisoner? We are not thine enemies! Where is my sword and our belongings? I demand that thou returnest them and release us!"

"Shut up!" The chill eye of their questioner turned icy. "You'll be lucky to be released in the next ten years if you don't get wise and cooperate. Do you have any idea of the spot you're in?"

"Spot?"

"Yes, spot! You're in real trouble! Joe," he spoke to the uniformed man who had been silently watching the questioning, "bring me that junk you found on these kids."

The man—it was one of the guards who had captured them—stepped through a door and returned presently with the sword and scabbard, the knives and pouches they had worn at their belts, and a curious metal object on the order of the ones some of the men in the room were wearing.

"You won't believe this," said the guard named Joe, "but the boys have checked out this stuff, and it's *real*. The sword and scabbard are museum pieces! Lord knows what they're worth, but Brady figures the jewels alone would bring fifty grand on today's market."

Sergeant Sykes whistled softly. A small crowd began to collect around them.

"And that's not all," Joe hastened on. "Look at this!" He opened the pouches and dumped their golden contents upon the desk. "We've no way of knowing if

the coins are authentic, but they are pure gold, and Brady says they might be a thousand years old. If so, they're collector's items and worth plenty."

Men fingered the sword and the gold, then looked at Brian and Merra. Sergeant Sykes said, "And the pistol, Joe. What about it?"

"We picked it up at the girl's feet," the guard replied. "Dippy's boys—the two that were able to talk before the ambulance came—say the pistol belongs to the girl and that she was shooting at them with it." He shrugged. "Could be. The tough chicks are coming young these days. Anyway, we can't prove it by the fingerprints. They're smudged."

"H'm. Any word from the hospital?"

"Not yet. But I'll tell you this, sarge. All five of that bunch were badly cut, and the interne on the second ambulance said he doubted one would live."

"So!" The thin mouth in the broad face became even thinner. Sergeant Sykes looked at Brian, then at Merra. "What a nice pair you are! Illegal possession of a firearm. Assault with deadly weapons. Attempted murder—and it'll be murder if that punk dies. And on top of it all, this—" His hand touched the sword and the glittering coins. "Probably grand theft." Abruptly the hand slapped the desk, so hard that the coins jumped. "Let's have it! Where'd you steal this stuff?"

It was several seconds before Brian could decipher enough of what he had heard to understand the accusations.

"Thou callest us thieves?" he said slowly.

"If you didn't steal it, then how did you get it?"

Brian fought to control himself. This cold, unbelieving, unfeeling world was almost worse in its way than Aradel under Albericus. In a voice that shook a little from his rising fury, he managed to say, "The sword, 'tis mine by right of combat, and fairly won! The gold, a gift from the Dryads to help in our quest!"

"Huh? Dry—what? You sure you didn't find it all in a garbage can?" The thin mouth curled in a sneer. "Phooey! I don't know where you got those trick costumes and that phony talk, but you're nothing but a pair of thieving punks and worse, in my opinion, than that bunch you cut up." Suddenly he glared at Merra. "You! Where did you get that pistol?"

"Explain thyself!" she cried back. "I know not what a pistol be!"

"Nuts! You're a lying little witch. The weapon was found at your feet, and you were seen using it. Any kid your age who runs around nights packing a pistol—"

"Enough!" Brian exploded. "She telleth no falsehood!"

Before anyone could even guess what he was about to do, his hand had streaked out faster than the eye could follow and closed on his sword. The sword flashed from the scabbard and he leaped quickly back, giving himself room to use it.

"Now hear ye!" he yelled, his voice drowning out the sudden shouts and exclamations as men fell away from him, most of them instantly producing weapons like the thing called a pistol. Fury made him oblivious to any possible danger. "Hear ye, and hear ye well! We speak truth, yet ye mind us not! What manner of men be ye? We come as strangers, seeking a thing long lost, and are at once beset by thieves. We find refuge in the park, but they follow and attack. Verily, we are forced to fight for our lives! Yet ye swallow the tale of those scoundrels and thieves, and hear not the truth! What manner of men—"

"Put down that sword, you jackass!" Sergeant Sykes roared, kicking his chair

aside.

"Give me thy word that we may go in peace, and I will put it away."

"I'll put *you* away, you thieving punk! I'll put you away for good!"

Brian saw the man's hand swing up, pointing the pistol thing at him. His blade, flicking quickly from side to side to hold a half dozen men at a distance, became a sudden blur. The pistol thing exploded and flew off across the room. Sergeant Sykes, now white of face, fell back holding his hand.

"I don't believe it!" someone whispered. "The way that young idiot handles a sword! If we don't stop him—"

Brian was momentarily startled by the weapon's explosion, for it was much louder than the other explosions in the park had been. For the first time he thought of the burning sting in his left arm, then instantly forgot it as more men erupted into the room. They approached him warily, then suddenly rushed him when an opened blanket was flung in his face.

The sword was caught in the blanket like a fish in a net, and before he could free it they were upon him. He lost the sword but squirmed out of their grasp, kicking, fighting, hurling anything he could get his hands on. A few feet away Merra screamed her hate and laid about her with a heavy stick she had snatched from a desk. "Rotten wretches!" she yelled shrilly. "Rogues! Dogs! Whelps! A malediction on thee all!"

A woman's voice, high and clear and sharp as a razor, brought all action to an abrupt end. Brian, breathing rapidly, turned with the others and stared open-mouthed at the commanding Amazon who had come into the room. Tall and muscular, she was the sort, he knew instinctively, who would have definite opinions that might turn out to be troublesome.

"Brawling with minors, are you?" she said icily. "Sergeant Sykes, what is the meaning of this?"

Sergeant Sykes did not reply. He was leaning against the wall, eyes closed, holding a bloody handkerchief about a wounded hand. It was the guard named Joe who spoke.

"Mrs. Mayfield," he began, "there was a gang fight in the park—"

"Lieutenant Mayfield," she corrected him. "And I will remind you again that I am in complete charge of juvenile offenders. They are to be brought to my office as soon as you have their names."

"Yes, ma'am. I—we thought you were off duty this evening."

"I was at night court. What's wrong with Sergeant Sykes?"

"That young rascal yonder cut him with a sword. I should warn you, ma'am; he's a ferocious devil—he ought to be handcuffed. The sergeant was just trying to get the facts about him when he went berserk. He's already cut up Dippy Scarri's gang and put them in the hospital. Three are in bad shape. One may die."

"H'm. See that the sergeant gets medical attention. And bring that pair into my office along with the sword and all the other exhibits. But no handcuffs—unless the kids cause more trouble."

Brian was propelled down a hall with Merra and thrust into a much smaller room containing a desk piled with papers and records, several chairs and a littered table, and some cabinets against a wall. He and Merra were given chairs at the table, facing the stern Amazon on the other side. The guard named Joe made room on the table for the sword and the other things, then gave a careful

account of all that had happened, and took his seat near the door.

For a minute the big woman studied the objects curiously. She examined the sword, touched the gold and the paper money received at the eating place, and suddenly picked up a large piece of chalk from Merra's pouch.

"A strange assortment, this. A rare sword studded with valuable gems. Old gold, modern money, and a piece of what looks like natural chalk. I've heard they have it around Dover." Abruptly she looked up, and in her clear, cold voice demanded, "What are you doing with a piece of natural chalk?"

Brian glanced at Merra. For the first time since they had arrived in this unknown land, there was a hint of mischief in her eyes.

"The chalk, good lady? We travel with it. And 'tis from the valley of the Loire, not Dover."

Lieutenant Mayfield stiffened slightly. Obviously it was an answer she neither expected nor wanted.

"I will have no nonsense from either of you," she bit out icily. "Nor will I stand for lies or evasions." She paused, then said, "The chalk is very curious, though unimportant. But the sword and the gold *must* be accounted for. Where did you get them?"

Merra gave one of her elfin smiles. It was such a marked change from her screaming fury during the fight that Brian looked at her in surprise. She's up to something, he told himself.

"The gold, dear lady," Merra said sweetly, "a gift it be from the Dryads. The sword, 'twas won in combat, even as Sir Brian hath related."

Again the Amazon stiffened. "*Sir* Brian, is it?"

"Indeed, yes. I knighted him with mine own hand for his valor. 'Twas unfitting that he remain a mere stableboy."

"I see." Lieutenant Mayfield's smile was chilling. "And where did all this take place?"

"In Aradel, dear lady, whence we came."

"Aradel? Where is that?"

"'Tis a fair kingdom, near Aquitaine."

"I see," the Amazon said again, her chiseled face quite blank. "You came from Aradel, where you knighted this Brian and were given gold by the Dryads. Do you know what the Dryads were?"

Merra smiled. "Of course. But dost thou?"

"The Dryads," Lieutenant Mayfield snapped, her voice rising, "were mythical creatures of the past. They never existed except in the minds of silly girls like you! How old are you, Merra?"

"As old as thou art inside, dear lady, and mayhap older, if ignorance be a sign of youth. It doth pain me to hear thee declare the nonexistence of mine own kind, for all things die with the death of belief. But if the Dryads exist not, then I be not here—for I be of that strain myself."

She turned gaily, her green eyes dancing with mischief. "Sir Brian, wilt thou pinch me? I am beginning to have doubts of mine own reality."

Obligingly Brian pinched her. "Ouch!" she squealed. "Verily, I am real!"

"And verily," the Amazon snapped, bringing her big hand down hard on the table, "I have had enough of this nonsense! I don't know whether you are playacting or suffering from delusions, but from now on you will give me proper

answers in proper English. If you are so sick in the head that you cannot do that, we'll have to put you in an institution. In either case, your parents must be informed. Who are they? What is their telephone number?"

Merra shook her head. "We be orphans. As for this thing thou callest a telephone—what be that?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what a phone is!" the big woman retorted in disgust.

The guard named Joe said, "She's trying to put you on, lieutenant. They gave us the same yarn about the pistol—pretended they'd never seen one before."

"If thou wantest not lies, why scornest truth?" Merra said sweetly. "Look you, Sir Brian hath a hole in his sleeve! And be that not a stain of blood around it? Prithee, what strange manner of weapon—"

Brian had noticed neither the hole nor the dark stain on the green fabric, but now he hurriedly rolled up his sleeve and saw the long mark on his skin, with drying blood around it. At the sight of it the guard leaped up to examine the arm.

"That's a bullet burn," he muttered, scowling. "But it doesn't prove anything—except that there may be another pistol we haven't found. These crazy kids are putting on some kind of an act. Now, all this stuff they stole …"

"They lifted it from a collection," Lieutenant Mayfield bit out with sudden decision. "It has to be that. Joe, check the files and see if anyone has reported the loss of a valuable sword and some old gold coins. And while you are about it, call the Tate Museum and find out if anything is missing from their arms exhibit. That old doctor what's his name could tell you."

"You mean that kooky guy they were laughing about a few years ago because he believed in time travel?"

"That's the one. I remember now. His name's Legrande."

A small light flickered at the back of Brian's mind, but before it could illuminate a recent corner of memory, several things happened within seconds. A stack of papers, that had been thrust aside to make room for the sword and the gold, abruptly fell to the floor. Brian did not see how Merra managed to get them off the table, but he glimpsed her small hands darting over them as they fell, and he heard the quick snap of her fingers.

As flame shot up from under the edge of the table, the Amazon screamed and Merra vanished.

It was only because he had been expecting something to happen that Brian was able to keep his presence of mind and act swiftly. A hurried movement of his hand swept most of the small objects on the table into a pouch. As Lieutenant Mayfield, surprisingly disorganized, leaped up shrilling "Fire! Fire!" he grabbed his sword and scabbard with one hand and all their possessions he could carry with the other, and darted for the door. He barely managed to slip out before the uniformed Joe, who had started down the hall, whirled and rushed back.

Joe almost collided with him, but actually failed to notice him in the excitement. Instinctively Brian turned left, for the hall to the right was suddenly full of people attracted by the cries. But he had taken less than a dozen steps when he realized that he and Merra could never leave the building from any point ahead. This section of the hall was a dead end.

He stopped and glanced quickly back, wondering where Merra was, but the

sight of two uniformed men rushing toward him drove him through the nearest open door. It slammed shut behind him, and he whirled as Merra abruptly became visible. She didn't manage it easily, shimmering as Nysa did, but appeared all at once as if the power that kept her invisible had failed.

"Whew!" she gasped, struggling weakly to lock the door. "That's the longest I've ever held it … thirty-six seconds—Oops!" She sank down on the floor in evident exhaustion.

Brian dropped the things he was carrying and leaped back to the door as someone in the hall banged against it and rattled the knob. The small locking mechanism was unfamiliar, but Merra must have given it the correct turn for the door held.

"Open up!" a stern voice ordered. "You can't go anywhere—this is the only way out!"

Merra found the strength to cry, "Fie on thee! And a plague of warts!"

Her response was cause for astonishment, for there were exclamations in the hall and a man said, "But that's impossible! She can't be in there! I was just coming out of the lab myself when I heard the lieutenant cry 'fire,' and I grabbed the extinguisher off the wall here and ran across and put it out. I saw everything that happened. The girl was in the lieutenant's office when the fire started and she couldn't possibly—"

"I don't get it," came the voice of the guard named Joe. "I saw it all myself. The only person that ran into the lab was that crazy fool with the sword."

"And not so crazy, if you ask me," said the first man. "After what I've seen—"

"No one asked your opinion," snapped the icicle voice of Lieutenant Mayfield. "If that rotten little devil slipped in there under your noses, it was because you were not minding your business! Merra, open this door immediately, or I'll break it down!"

"Thou needest not break it," Merra called sweetly. "Verily, I be sure 'twould fall if thou wouldst but only lean against it!"

The only reply was a furious banging on the outer panel that caused Brian to wonder how long the door would hold, even though it seemed to be made of steel. This place was entirely unlike the other offices, which had glass partitions and wooden doors. What mysteries were conducted in here he could not guess, for there were many pictures of unpleasant-looking people clipped to wires, and on one side was a black alcove where a red light burned.

Hurriedly he buckled on his sword, then stood scowling at the door, wondering what to do. They seemed to be trapped.

"Do not worry, Sir Brian," Merra said in their own tongue. "As soon as I regain my strength, we'll leave this horrid place."

"B-but how? I don't see—"

"My chalk will take us away. Surely you were able to bring it with the other things!"

"Chalk?" He dropped to his knees and emptied both pouches on the floor. The chalk was not with the gold and paper money.

"Oh, dear!" Merra's voice was unsteady.

"But—but why do you need chalk?"

"To draw a design for a formula, you goose! But perhaps I can find a substitute. Something tells me that while I search, you had better barricade the

door. I'm sure that horse will soon be leaning all over it."

Brian dragged a heavy desk against the door. After looking quickly through the drawers for something resembling chalk, he thrust an equally heavy cabinet against the desk. From the sounds, much was going on out in the hall, and he had no doubt that very soon the lock would be broken or the door forced from its hinges. How long would his barricade hold?

As the door began to shake under the blows now being given it, Brian searched frantically through shelves, drawers, and boxes. Suddenly Merra gave a little cry and held up a large white crayon.

"This should do! Clear the floor for me!"

Hastily he flung chairs aside, and then scooped up the gold as she began drawing a large circle on the floor. Her small hands moved fast, but the design she commenced to make within the circle was extremely intricate. He stood watching, hands clenched tightly. How could she possibly finish it before the door was broken open?

There was a sharp crack, and he saw the door move slightly. He put his weight against the cabinet, trying to resist the thrust of those on the other side.

Abruptly Merra cried, "It is done, Sir Brian! Take your place—and pray that I have the strengdi I need!"

Quickly he looped the pouches to his belt and stood with his back against hers, holding her hands.

"Ready?"

"Ready!"

There was another sharp crack as Merra began her curious chant made up of numbers. The barricade was giving way as she started her rhyme:

> "By my power, by my right,
> Take us back through time tonight;
> Take us quickly, take us fast,
> Take us deep into the past,
> Take us to that sacred tree
> Where Nysa made a home for me!"

The barricade gave way entirely and men were coming into the room as she finished. But at that instant he felt the familiar giddiness, and everything around them vanished …

9
Journey at Dusk

ONCE AGAIN BRIAN CAME DOWN WITH SUCH A jolt that he crumpled. But this time when he opened his eyes he was relieved to see that they were back in the safety of the cavelike place adjoining the great oak. It was such a comfort, in fact, that for a while afterward he made no attempt to rise. What they had just been through seemed like an evil dream. In a way it *was* a dream, for in this familiar present the incredible place where they had been didn't even exist.

Suddenly, remembering their mission, he felt an overpowering sense of failure. They'd failed miserably—and time was swiftly passing.

Beside him Merra got slowly to her knees. Finally she managed to stand, but only for a moment. With a little sigh she sank back to the floor. "Poor me," she said weakly. "I am all but used up, Sir Brian. Thirty-six seconds of invisibility nearly did for me. How we ever got here afterward …" Then she gave a quick gasp of dismay. "Oh, dear!"

"What's wrong?"

"Tancred! We left him behind!"

"I know. But it couldn't be helped. Were you able to talk to him from afar before we left?"

"Yes—it was after those guards captured us in the park. I told him to stay there till we got back. B-but I didn't realize—"

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be safe."

"How can you *say* that! Heaven knows what unhallowed horrors may be lurking in that awful city, ready to gobble an innocent bird! We'll have to go right back this minute and—"

"No! Don't be a goose!"

"I'll not be called a goose! I'm much too mature mentally—"

"Then don't act like a little girl who's just lost her doll. You know you're not able to take us back—"

"Fie on you!" she flashed. "Tancred's far more than a doll! Why, he's a member of the family and practically human! I couldn't possibly leave him—"

"You'll have to leave him till we get some rest," he told her firmly. "Anyway, that place—the temple or whatever it is—will not be open for many hours. We'd be foolish to go there too early and risk being caught again."

She sniffed. "Oh, very well," she said, suddenly forgetting her temper and giving him a mischievous look. "You do speak wisdom in spite of being a mere woodcutter's son."

With an effort she stood up again. "I hate to tell Nysa and Uncle Benedict what happened, but of course we'll have to. Then we can rest for a while."

They went through the passageway to the main room with the fireplace. No one was there, nor was there an answer to Merra's call. She hurried up the

carved stairway, then came down, shaking her head.

"I—I can't understand it! They said they wouldn't leave till we got back. What could have taken them away?"

"You can talk to them from afar. Why don't you do it and find out?"

"I haven't the strength. I mean, such—such a dreadful lot depends on us, don't you see? I must hoard my powers, since we'll be going right back into all that trouble in a little while." She shook her head almost tearfully and started slowly up the stairway. "I'll throw you a blanket. And—and remember: There's a difference of fifteen hours in the time between there and here, so we mustn't dare sleep more than six hours. My birthday is tomorrow, so we've simply got to be at that temple when it opens."

He was trying without success to reason out the time difference when thought faded from him. Hardly a second later, it seemed, Merra was shaking him awake.

"Get up, Sir Brian! Hurry! We've overslept—it's almost dark outside. We should have been on our way two hours ago!"

He thrust the blanket away, then bounced to his feet and buckled on his sword. "Has Nysa returned?"

"No," she said worriedly. "I can't understand it—unless something unexpected came up with the peasant leaders. Maybe she had to take Uncle Benedict to another meeting. Oh, if I'd just had Tancred to wake me! I'm perishing for tea—but we haven't time. Quick—outside we must go to splash our faces from the sacred spring. Then we'll take bread and cheese to eat later."

The spring refreshed him. Back inside, he hastily crammed the food she gave him into his pouch, and followed her through the passageway to the cavelike room. Grimly he took his place in the great circle and clasped her hands. With the touch he could feel the fear in her.

Suddenly she exclaimed, "It's just come to me what must have happened. I—I made a little mistake."

"In what?"

"In time. It's *so* confusing. But I can easily make an adjustment. Ready?"

"Ready!"

As she started her curious chant with the numbers, he was aware again of that hateful, cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. The coldness had been there ever since she had first chanted those numbers many hours ago, but now it was worse. It so disturbed him that he heard only the last few words of her rhyme:

> "… north or south or east or west,
> Please take us safely on our quest."

Then came the giddiness, the terrible feeling of whirling and flying apart, and instinctively he tried to prepare himself for the jolt he knew would follow. It came, but instead of the hard pavement he had expected, he was flung down with Merra upon a carpet of soft grass.

It was several seconds before he could collect his wits and realize they had landed somewhere in the park. How strange, he thought, to see the morning sun streaming through the trees! Back in the grove, only minutes ago, it had been nearly dark.

"Praise be that we fell in the park instead of that street!" he muttered

thankfully. “But why did it happen this way?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s because we have no established landing point here. I—I hate to confess it, Sir Brian, but I was horribly afraid we’d find ourselves returning to that utterly senseless place where that horse of a female—” Merra broke off with a little squeal of delight. “Tancred! Oh, Tancred! How I missed you!”

She caught the nightingale gently in her hands and held it to her cheek, cooing to it. “Now, precious one,” she went on finally, “we must go speedily to that white temple across the lake yonder. Inside we surely will need you—but I have a feeling those haughty guards do not care for birds. So you must hide in the cowl of my cap until we are safely inside.”

Tancred rode on her shoulder until they neared the temple steps, then he crept under the cowl so that he was hidden by one of her thick golden braids. On the steps Brian paused briefly, making sure Tancred could not be seen, then his eye was caught by the Roman letters carved in the marble above the columns: TATE MUSEUM. Time, he realized suddenly, had turned *mouseion* into *museum*, and even changed the meaning of the word. But what about *docteur le grande?*

Something stirred in his memory, but was quickly forgotten as he mounted the steps. For the coldness within him was growing. Almost at the entrance he stopped abruptly, staring at the small line of people waiting to pay admission at the counter just within the door. A tall figure in black was moving away inside. He glimpsed it only briefly, but it was enough to turn the coldness in his stomach into a hard ball of ice. Maybe it wasn’t Albericus he’d caught sight of, though it made no difference. The monk was near, and might even be watching for them somewhere in the temple.

At the counter he managed the problem of the admission fee by giving the collector of it one of the pieces of paper money that seemed, by its marking, to have more value than the others. It worked, and he received more paper money in exchange. As he turned away, however, he was stopped by a stern-faced guard who had been standing by watching them.

“That sword, young man,” the guard began coldly. “You cannot wear it in here. It must be left at the check room.”

“But—but I may need it,” Brian protested.

“Need it for what? Check it, or I’ll have to put you out.”

He was seeking desperately for something elusive in his memory when Merra came to his rescue. “He needeth it to show to Docteur Legrande,” she said quickly.

The guard looked blank, but the gray-haired woman behind the counter said, “I’m sure it’s all right. Dr. Legrande is curator of the medieval collection. I understand he’s been getting together some costumes for the art school.”

Brian was so relieved to get away from the watchful guard that he forgot to ask where Dr. Legrande could be found. But the information was easily obtained from a student in the next hall whose class was busy making drawings of the old Greek statuary on exhibit there.

“You’ll find him downstairs in the east wing,” the student explained. “It’s all underground there. His office is at the very end of that long hall.” The student paused, studying them interestedly. “Say, those are great outfits you two are wearing! How about posing for me a couple minutes?”

Brian shook his head. “We be in great haste. But our thanks for thy help.”

They hurried away, finally located the east wing and the stairs, and came at last to a long, empty hall where a light gleamed through the large open door at the end. Merra whispered softly to Tancred. The nightingale left his hiding place, flew up, and alighted on a broken stone cross, intricately carved, that decorated the corner near the bottom step.

"Keep watch, good friend," Merra said uneasily. "I know that black-robed Lucifer is somewhere near. I can just feel it. But you mustn't let him find us till Sir Brian has the true sword in his hand."

As they started quickly down the hall, she added in a low voice, "I wouldn't have dreamed Cerid was trying to tell us the name of the person she left the sword with. I thought Nysa had misunderstood her. It sounded so French."

"But I don't understand. How could she get in here without trouble, and find the right person—"

"Oh, don't be a goose! Cerid could remain invisible for as long as she wanted, which means she could go anywhere. As for finding the right person, you forget she was of the Dryads. Why, even I can sense the worth of a man a full league away—"

Her voice died, for they were almost at the door. "Oh, dear," she whispered worriedly. "We are nearly at the end of our search, yet I know all is not well. Do you not feel it, Sir Brian?"

"This is no time to be plagued by feelings," he muttered, and strode determinedly through the doorway.

It was a strange room he suddenly found himself in. From floor to ceiling on all sides it was filled with shelves and cabinets, all jammed with old books, manuscripts, helmets, weapons, tools, and assorted odds and ends that might have been found in any village at home. Two desks piled with papers occupied the space in the center, directly under a skylight. A young woman with hair cut like a page boy's and with huge round glasses sat at one of the desks examining a yellowed sheet of vellum with a large magnifying glass. As they entered she glanced up with lively dark eyes that were instantly full of interest, and smiled.

"Well!" she said in a softly musical voice. "How very nice! You two are so authentic you are like a breath of fresh air from the past. I'm Mary Day. What can I do for you?"

"If it pleaseth thee, good lady," Brian began, "We—we seek the Doctor Legrande."

"It pleaseth me, but thou seekest in vain," Mary Day replied, her smile broadening. "The good doctor is away. And that is regrettable, for I'm sure he would enjoy your costumes as well as your English. He would like it better if you spoke in Latin—but who today can even read it save a few scholars and the clergy?"

"It is our common tongue at home," Brian told her, speaking in Latin. "Do you know it?"

"Of course I know it!" she exclaimed in the same language. "I would hardly be Dr. Legrande's assistant if I didn't—" She stopped, her mouth open in astonishment. Then carefully she set down the magnifying glass and the vellum. "Who are you, and where are you from that you can speak so easily in a tongue long dead?"

"He is Sir Brian the Fair," Merra said quickly. "And I am called Merra. We are

from Aradel."

"Aradel?" Mary Day repeated. "Aradel? Where have I heard that name?" All at once she gasped. "I don't believe it! It's impossible! How did you get here?"

"The same way my mother did, five years ago. We of the Dryads have certain powers. We can travel by formula."

"Through *time?"*

"If you wish to call it that," said Merra, her green eyes twinkling. "Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are all one, and are separated mainly in our minds. The Dryads know these things, for they are born with knowledge. But Sir Brian is a mere mortal, and woefully ignorant."

"Even as I," Mary Day murmured, still speaking in Latin. Her face had paled, and her dark eyes behind the huge spectacles now seemed enormous. "But I—I still cannot believe any of this. It has to be a hoax. What—what was your mother's name?"

"Cerid."

"Cerid! Oh my lord! And why did she come here?"

"To hide the sword of Aradel in a place of safety. But now the time has come to take it home, for only with it can a tyrant be destroyed and a kingdom be regained."

Mary Day stared at them, momentarily speechless. Then she took off her glasses and buried her face in her hands. "He told me about Cerid, but I couldn't believe him!" she sobbed. "It is impossible!" Suddenly she looked up and shook her head. "I still say it is impossible. I am intelligent enough to know what is possible, and what isn't. I am a Phi Beta Kappa. I have three degrees and a doctorate, and I speak five languages. So I know very well that the Dryads are only mythical creatures. I know it is impossible to travel through time. And I know it is equally impossible for anyone to appear and disappear at will, as this imaginary Cerid is supposed to have done. Poor Dr. Legrande was simply having hallucinations over an old sword he'd found." She said this last almost defiantly while she wiped her eyes.

Merra smiled. "And if I vanished and reappeared before you this very minute, you would know better than to believe it, would you not?"

Mary Day blinked and opened her mouth, but before she could speak, Merra vanished. Five seconds later Merra gave one of her gay little laughs and took form again on the other side of the room.

Mary Day sprang to her feet, staring, and abruptly sat down again. She rubbed her eyes and stared once more. When she finally spoke, her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Were—were you two the pair that were caught fighting in the park last night, and—and later disappeared from a closed room at the police station?"

"Yes. How did you learn about it?"

"There was a lot about you in the morning news. I—I didn't connect you with it at first, because, well—they said you were young criminals working in costume, and that you'd stolen some valuable things from a collection."

Mary Day paused, her dark eyes swinging from Merra to Brian. "I'm sure the police have misunderstood you completely," she went on. "They're hardly equipped to believe anything you might tell them. It's difficult enough for me. You see, you've upset a great many basic things I've been taught, and it's been a

shock. Now, why don't you sit down and tell me about Aradel, and all that has happened to you here."

Brian told her, showing her the coins in his pouch and his sword. "The scabbard," he explained, "belongs to the true sword, but Cerid was unable to bring it when she came."

"And this sword," said Mary Day, looking at it wonderingly, "is the substitute Albericus had made? Oh, it is a beautiful thing … and extremely valuable. No wonder the police couldn't believe it belonged to you! You say you won it in combat with—"

"He beat that rotten Rupert and broke his pate!" Merra put in. "And with a quarterstaff, no less. Naturally, I knighted him."

"You have the power to—to create knights?"

"I do. Young as I am, I am the ranking princess of Aradel, and destined to become queen—that is, if I am alive tomorrow, and we are able to return with the true sword." Merra paused, then said, "But our time grows short, good lady. Where *is* the true sword?"

Mary Day wet her lips. "Dr. Legrande has it," she said slowly. "He left yesterday for London, and he took the sword with him."

"To London!" Brian exclaimed. "But—but—"

"Let me explain," she said. "People here have given Dr. Legrande a bad time about the sword. In fact, he calls ours the land of non-belief. I hate to admit it, but I'm just as guilty as the others. But in England there are those who still believe in elves and such things. So naturally—"

"But the sword!" Merra cried. "A kingdom depends upon it—and many lives!"

"I'm beginning to realize that," Mary Day said, clenching her hands. "I'm trying to think how I can reach him."

"Can you talk to him from afar?" Brian asked quickly. "There are those in Aradel—"

"I can manage it with this," Mary Day answered, reaching for a curious instrument on her desk. "The problem is to locate him. He'll fly back immediately when I tell him about you. He wouldn't miss—"

"He—*he flies?"*

"Today we travel in machines that fly. Janice," she said into the instrument she was holding, "this is Mary Day, Dr. Legrande's assistant. We've an emergency, and I must locate Dr. Legrande immediately. Will you place a call to him at Claridge's in London? If he isn't there, see if they can find him. He may be at the British Museum, conferring with Dr. Harlowe."

She replaced the instrument on her desk, then said, "We can only wait, my friends. But I should warn you: Even if they find him right away, he couldn't possibly get back here before tomorrow evening. More likely it will be the next morning."

Brian looked at Merra. Her face was stricken. "That will be too late!" she whispered. "Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless we can prevent Albericus from returning to Aradel."

Mary Day gasped. "Do you mean to say that creature is here somewhere?"

"Yes," said Brian. "We saw him last evening, outside. I don't think he saw us—at least I hope not. But I'm sure he's here now, looking for the sword."

“Does he know about Dr. Legrande?”

“I doubt it. He wouldn’t be here now if he hadn’t found Cerid’s notes for the formula.”

“Don’t underestimate him!” Merra burst out. “He’s as skilled at sorcery as he is at swordsmanship. That black-robed devil can find out anything he wants to know. Oh, dear,” she wailed, “why did Dr. Legrande have to go to London at a time like this?”

There was a sudden, unhappy silence. Brian sat rubbing his knuckles against his jaw, wondering how long it would take Albericus to find out about Merra and himself, as well as about Dr. Legrande. He was startled by a sharp ringing from the instrument on the desk.

“That can’t be London so soon,” Mary Day said in English, as she caught up the thing. “Yes?” she spoke into it. “This is Dr. Day. Yes, Mr. Lawson, I saw them. Two young people in costume, one with a sword … Oh, very well. If they insist on seeing me, I’ll have to talk to them.”

Frowning, she replaced the thing on her desk. “Trouble seems to be piling up on us,” she said, obviously upset. “The police have been searching for you. The guard at the entrance says they are on their way here.”

Abruptly she stood up. “This way, quick! I’ve got to hide you!”

10
Duel

BRIAN WAS SURPRISED WHEN MARY DAY LED them to a cabinet at the back of the room and gave it a slight tug. The entire cabinet swung outward, disclosing a narrow passageway and a dimly lighted flight of stairs leading upward.

"This isn't supposed to be a secret doorway," she said. "It's just a space saver until the new wing is finished. You can see it from the top of the stairs—but don't open the outer door unless you're forced to. Hurry, get inside—"

"Wait!" said Merra. "Here comes Tancred."

"Don't tell me there are *three* of you!"

"He's my nightingale. He keeps watch for us."

Tancred swooped into the room and settled on her shoulder. They slipped through the opening, and Mary Day swung the cabinet back in place behind them.

Brian climbed the stairs to a small cubicle with a barred door on one side. The place was a rough wooden structure, obviously temporary; beyond it there were sounds of a giant machine and men working. He was tempted to open the door, but partially satisfied his curiosity by peering through cracks in the wall and the doorframe.

A short distance away from the door a deep excavation was being made by a monstrous digger that reminded him of a huge insect. The temple, he remembered, was on a low hill, and as nearly as he could tell it was the hill that was being scooped out to make space for more underground rooms.

His inspection was interrupted by Merra. "Tancred has just seen Albericus!" she whispered. "Tancred says Albericus is following those guards—police, they call them—who are coming to question Mary Day about us."

Brian sat down on the steps, suddenly icy inside. "That devil is catching up with us," he muttered. "He knows we are here now. It won't take him long to find out about the sword. If Dr. Legrande happens to send his message—"

Merra sat down near him. Her green eyes were clouded with worry. "The fates seem to be against us," she said. "We—we'll just have to accept what is, and go on from there. It's impossible for us to keep Albericus from learning the truth—and it seems just as impossible to get the sword in time for the attack."

"How soon is your birthday? Or birth hour, rather?"

"It would be eighteen hours from now—if we were in Aradel."

"You say there's fifteen hours difference?"

"I thought there was, but now I suspect it's all in how I repeat the formula—there are certain adjustments that have to be made, and it's so easy to forget them. It's very confusing, but I'll soon have it straightened out. Anyway, it will be at least thirty hours before Dr. Legrande can arrive. We—we've got to think of something."

"You've already thought of it. You're right, we must keep Albericus here."

"That's no problem, Sir Brian—at least for a while. He certainly won't leave without the sword."

"Of course not. He wouldn't dare. But he's bound to learn Dr. Legrande will be bringing it. You see what's going to happen?"

She nodded. "He'll be watching for Dr. Legrande. And he'll take the sword away from him—unless we stop him."

"I'll do the stopping," he told her. "You keep away from him."

"I'll do no such thing! You'll need my help! And you've got to promise not to fight him—unless you have the true sword."

"I'll do what I have to do," he muttered, his jaws knotting.

They fell silent, waiting. Brian remembered the food they had brought, then forgot it, appetite lost in the uncertainty of the hours ahead. What was Mary Day saying to the police? And where was the black-robed Albericus? Was he standing in the hallway, listening?

Suddenly he said, "I know now I must be under a spell. There is so much I cannot remember. But who cast the spell? Was it your uncle?"

"Of course."

"Then where was it done? At the hut of Harle, my father? And was it Harle who gave you shelter when you escaped from Celadon?"

"Yes, Sir Brian."

"Then why was a spell cast upon the son of Harle? And why did your uncle train him as I was trained?"

"Oh, don't be a silly goose! Don't you realize by now that my uncle knew from the first that he could turn you into a master swordsman? And naturally the Dryads knew your destiny. It was to help me find the sword and save Aradel."

"But why the spell, and all the secrecy? Don't tell me again it was for my own good!" He made a growling noise in his throat.

"But of course it was for your own good, you goose! It had to be kept from Albericus, or he would have had you killed. He's already divined that a fair-haired Celt might be his undoing."

Her small hand reached forth and clasped his arm. "And please, please," she added earnestly, "be ever watchful and do not let Albericus find you until you have the true sword. You must not fight him without it. He is twice your size, and his reach is incredible. His arms are like steel, and he is the second greatest swordsman on earth. Please, promise me—"

"I'll promise nothing," he ground out.

Again they were silent, waiting. At long last there came a guarded voice from below, and they hurried down to the cabinet that Mary Day was holding open.

"Whew! The session I've had!" she said. "The police can't get it through their heads that you're not a pair of dangerous young criminals—" She stopped and went swiftly across the room to the corridor door, which was already closed, and did something to the lock. Returning, she said, "That Albericus gives me the creeps. He—"

"He—he came in here and talked to you?"

"You just bet he did! And while the police were here! Oh, you should have heard him—he spoke to me in Latin and French, very old French, and was as pious as you please. But he demanded that I tell the police in English you had

stolen your sword from his private collection. I had to tell them, for I'm certain he understood English too. And right in the middle of it Dr. Legrande called from London!"

"No!"

"Yes! He called, and I was at my wit's end to make him understand. For I had to use Gaelic, which he doesn't know too well, and which I pray Albericus doesn't know. Greek would have been better, but I would stake my life that Albericus is well versed in it. Anyway, Dr. Legrande finally understood, and he expects to arrive tomorrow evening. He can hardly wait to meet you. And since the museum will be closed when he arrives, I promised to let him in through his old side entrance—the one you just saw up those steps. The museum staff doesn't like it, but they can't say anything. Dr. Legrande is a very wealthy man, and he's building the new addition at his own expense." She paused, then said, "What's the matter, Sir Brian?"

"Gaelic," he said slowly, "is our native tongue in Aradel. It is forbidden, and one risks the stake to be heard speaking it. I don't know if Albericus understands it, but I've a feeling he does."

"Oh, dear God! We can only pray he doesn't. Anyway, we dare not take a chance. If he wants the sword, I haven't the least doubt that he would kill Dr. Legrande to get it." She closed her eyes and shuddered. "Honestly, I've never met a human that I so loathed on sight, and that so filled me with fear. He's a monster!"

"He is that!" Merra whispered. "If you could see the piled bones of those he's burned …"

"Then we must have some protection," Mary Day went on, speaking in her easy Latin with occasional words from other languages for clarity. "We cannot call in the police. They'd arrest you on sight. But I know a night guard here I can trust, so maybe I can get him to stand by and keep watch tomorrow evening."

She sat down, frowning, and began tapping her nervous fingers on the desk. "Now, we have another little problem. The police and the day guards are searching the museum for you, and every policeman in the city is on the watch for you." She almost smiled. "They'll *never* forgive you for escaping the way you did! So you'll have to stay right here in hiding until Dr. Legrande arrives."

She studied each of them, and sighed. "Honestly, I'd give an arm and a leg to be able to stay here with you and talk! There are so many things I want to ask about. But tonight I'm being specially honored at my university, and I'm forced to go. It's out of town, and it will be impossible for me to get back until late tomorrow morning. But I'm sure you'll be all right if you'll keep the door locked. If anyone knocks, don't answer. And don't answer the phone. Just stay locked up, and *don't* leave the room."

She stopped a moment, then said, "Back of that swinging cabinet where the steps are, there's a washroom to the right, and a cubbyhole to the left with a cot in it. Dr. Legrande is old, and he always rests there when he's tired. Sir Brian will have to sleep on the floor, but there's an extra blanket he can use. Now, you'll need food—"

"We brought along some bread and cheese," Brian told her.

Mary Day insisted upon seeing it. Then she tasted it. "Black bread and goat's cheese!" she said, delighted. "Made in a fabled land centuries ago! It's better

than any bread or cheese that can be bought today—but there isn't enough of it to hold you till tomorrow night. I'll go out now and get some things for you."

Making sure the corridor was empty, she went out, carefully locking the door behind her. When she returned long later, she carried a large paper sack full of burgers and fruit.

Before her final departure, she glanced up at the skylight, frowning. "I'm sure no one can break in there," she said. "But I'd suggest you keep the lights off, and stay behind the cabinet after dark. That—that *creature* may go prowling, and there's no use advertising your hiding place."

When she was gone, Brian felt a distinct sense of loss. She was their only friend in this strange and unfriendly world.

He checked the door and went up the long flight of stairs behind the cabinet to test the other door in the cubicle. The huge insect of a digging machine had stopped working, and from the deep pit below it came a strong smell of oil. He sniffed it curiously, wondering what could have happened, then forgot it when he returned to the room and found Merra exploring the contents of the food sack.

There were six big burgers, a generous supply of chips, and two kinds of fruit. He had never eaten either kind, but he knew they were oranges and bananas, for the Iberian traders had occasionally brought them up from the coast for the abbot's table. Merra, hungrily sniffing the warm burgers, suggested that they eat two of those first, with some of the fruit, and save their bread and cheese till later.

The food satisfied their hunger, but did nothing to lessen the uncertainty hanging over them. Many long hours of waiting stretched ahead. They were practically prisoners while they waited; for beyond this room, surely somewhere near, was Albericus.

Why, Brian asked himself over and over, should the fate of Aradel rest in such lowly hands as his own, a mere woodcutter's son? Still, if he could save Aradel, what did it matter? Anyway, he didn't feel lowly anymore. The truly lowly ones were the worthless ones, like those arrogant students at the abbey.

The skylight grayed, and gradually the room darkened. Merra finally retreated to a cot in the alcove. Brian, with the extra blanket, stretched out on the floor at the foot of the stairs. The last thing he was conscious of was the faint but rank smell of oil coming from the pit that had been dug by the huge machine.

He was quietly awakened by the soft beating of Tancred's wings on his face.

Brian felt for the sword beside him. Drawing it stealthily from its scabbard, he rose to his feet. Some instinct warned him to be absolutely silent. For several seconds he stood motionless, listening. Then he inched over to the heavy cabinet whose back closed the opening to the narrow passageway where he stood.

Suddenly he was aware of movement on the other side of the cabinet. Someone was in the room!

Cold fingers of fear crept down his spine. He felt along the cabinet, searching for a small crack he could peer through, and was horrified to discover that he had failed to close it tightly before he went to sleep. In spite of its weight, the cabinet was so well balanced that only a slight pressure of the hand was needed to move it.

The glow of the outer lights around the museum, coming through the skylight,

would have outlined the prowler in the room, but Brian wasted no time trying to see who it was. Nor did he wonder how the person had gained entry. With the unknown powers Albericus had at his disposal, the stoutest of locks would not have held him for long. It had to be Albericus, and there was only one reason for his presence in the room.

The monk knew Gaelic and had understood everything Mary Day had said to Dr. Legrande. Now Albericus was trying to locate the private entrance by which Dr. Legrande would arrive.

Brian found the knob at the back of the cabinet and very slowly eased it shut. Then cautiously, carefully, he pressed the point of his sword between the wall and the wood, pried it tight, and used the sword as a lever to hold it that way.

By the sounds, the man on the other side was moving along the wall, testing the shelves and tapping the spaces in between. Presently he reached the cabinet. Brian chilled as the tapping increased. Suddenly a powerful hand seized the cabinet and gave it a jerk that nearly tore it away from the point of the sword. All Brian's strength was needed to hold it in place.

Finally, sensing Merra near, he turned his head and saw her standing in the vague light of the stairs, one clenched hand pressed to her mouth. In the other hand was the small dagger she always wore at her belt.

"He's gone," she whispered at last, as the room beyond them grew quiet. "I can tell."

Even so, they waited till the rising hum of the city told them dawn had come, then they swung the cabinet aside and entered.

Nothing seemed to be changed in the room. The door was locked as securely as it had been the evening before, and the sack containing the remainder of their food was still on the desk where they had left it.

"I'd feel better if he'd taken our burgers," Brian muttered. "At least it would show he's human!"

"He's human," Merra said, lips compressed. "But I told you he has powers."

"Will those powers open a locked door?"

"Yes, and lock it again."

"But what about food? If he's human—"

"One such as he. needs little food, and he can carry that under his robe." She paused. "Sir Brian …"

"Yes?"

"If you are forced by the fates to cross swords with him, beware of his eyes. Like my uncle, he is skilled at casting a spell."

It was an unsettling beginning for an unpleasant day. The instrument called a phone rang continually. Several times there was a knocking at the door. Finally, after someone impatiently tried the knob, they thought it wiser to hide beyond the cabinet until Mary Day arrived. But Mary Day did not return that morning. By late afternoon, when there was still no sign of her, Brian realized something must have happened.

Far more worried than he wanted to admit, he climbed the stairs to the cubicle and peered through a crack, wondering from what direction Dr. Legrande would arrive. His attention was momentarily taken by several workmen near the excavation, discussing the giant machine. From the few words of their speech he could understand, he gathered that the digging arm had broken, smashing a tank

of oil which had run down into the pit. Then he noticed the line of shrubbery that shielded the area from the street, and the curving steps winding to the strip of park below. It would be up those steps, surely, that Dr. Legrande would come.

The workmen left. Twilight came, and he watched the steps with increasing uneasiness. Merra climbed to the cubicle, bringing the remainder of their food. "We ought to eat while we have the chance," she said. "We may not be able to later."

He scowled at the graying steps. "You sound as if the world is ending shortly."

"It could be for us. The fates haven't decided yet." She spoke lightly, but in the near-dark of the cubicle her green eyes were troubled. "You see, Sir Brian, the time of my birth was many hours ago. I am still alive—but in the wrong world. In our world I'm afraid the peasants are already attacking Rondelaine."

His jaws knotted helplessly. He sat down and tried to eat one of the burgers, but could not. Thinking of Mary Day and what he should do in her absense, he got up and tested the bar on the door, then tried out the lock so he would be able to open it quickly when Dr. Legrande came. As he did this he began worrying again about Albericus. The monk would be watching too. But where was he?

Suddenly he crouched, trying to see through other tiny openings, but all he could make out were some of the skylights marking underground rooms. Would Albericus be hiding near one of those?

Though night had come, the lights around the museum cast a glow over the area, making everything visible except the steps. These were shadowed by the shrubbery. As he stared at them, he began to have the feeling that something was wrong—or was it just the ice in his stomach? The ice was colder, and it seemed to have become permanent.

But something *was* wrong. All at once he realized it was his thinking. This was the worst possible place to wait for Dr. Legrande.

With unsteady fingers he unlocked the door and threw back the bar.

"No!" Merra gasped. "You're not going outside! Albericus—"

"A plague on him! I have to go—just pray I'm not too late!"

"But—but—"

"I must be nearer the avenue. Stay here—watch for Mary Day!"

"But the guards—the police—if they see you—"

He did not take time to reply, but rushed across the gravel toward the steps.

He was almost there when he made out movement in the shadow. Someone was coming up. He stopped short. The figure emerged into the glow of the museum lights, and now he saw a frail man with bushing white hair who carried a package under his arm. The package was the size of a sword.

"Dr. Legrande?"

The man looked up with a smile. "Yes?"

Brian's relief was quickly ended as a towering shadow detached itself from the blackness of the great machine and swooped like a hawk upon Dr. Legrande. The package was jerked from the frail man's grasp, and the black-robed shadow whirled for the steps.

Somehow Brian managed to get there first. As he spun to face Albericus, his sword was in his hand, swinging with all the force and fury he could put into it. Against such an adversary, he knew, his only chance was speed. So swift and sudden was the attack that he might have done for his enemy then. But the long

package was in the way.

Albericus dropped the thing, stepped quickly back, and whipped out a gleaming blade from the folds of his robe. “Scum of Aradel!” he spat hoarsely. “You should have been burned with the rest of your rotten breed! But I will have your head tonight—that I will take back and burn! *Look at me*, you whelp! *Look at me!”*

Beware of his eyes, Merra had cautioned, but under that compelling voice it was hard not to look at them. Brian forced his attention first on the sword, and then on the headless cross the monk wore on a chain about his waist. That polished cross caught the light from the museum, and flashed with every movement of the sword arm.

With his eye on that telltale cross, which told him in advance where to be or not to be, he darted in and leaped aside, trying to use speed to make up for his enemy’s reach, and hoping the power of the sword itself would nullify the other’s strength and skill.

“Look at me!” Albericus demanded again. *“Look at me!”*

So insistent was the demand that it was suddenly impossible not to look. He stared into those merciless eyes, and was suddenly caught and held by them. An icy chill shot through him, for he knew he was looking at death. As steel clashed against steel, his hand went numb with the force of his adversary’s blows. He tried desperately to cling to his weapon, and almost lost it when his foot slipped on the gravel. He managed to roll away from the next great blow, his head saved only by his quickness. But the terrible eyes held him, and he might have died a moment later had not Merra rushed forth, screaming her hate and flinging gravel into that deadly face under the hood.

“Ghoul!” she cried. “Murderer! Killer of children! Cut him down, Sir Brian! He fights with his eyes—not his sword!”

Albericus cursed and threw up an arm to shield his eyes from the gravel. It was all the diversion Brian needed. He attacked with a greater fury, and the point of his sword made a gash in the robe and cut through the heavy chain. The headless cross fell to the ground. An instant later the blade flashed again, and the long sword in the monk’s hand was sent flying.

Albericus roared in pain and hate. His sword arm dangled, but he managed to raise the other and shake a clenched fist at his advancing victor. He stepped back and began a dreadful imprecation, but before he could voice it the ground beneath him crumbled. He tumbled downward with a final curse and vanished in the pit.

Merra ran close and passed her trembling hands over the edge of it, snapping her fingers. Flame shot up from the oil, a great mounting pillar of flame. “Burn!” she cried. “Burn! Burn! Burn!” Then she turned away, hands over her face, and began to sob.

With the roaring flame came sounds of confusion in the distance. There were excited cries, and then the sudden scream of sirens. Brian was hardly aware of it. For long seconds he stood mute and half in shock, conscious only of a change within him. He wondered if he could have defeated Albericus more easily with the true sword, but he doubted it. After all, the true sword was really a symbol, and its real power must come from the hand that held it. Certainly it wouldn’t

have given him this feeling of confidence, this sureness that he was finally ready for whatever purpose Brother Benedict had trained him. It had been a very hard and Spartan training, and surely only a part of the reason for it had been the recovery of the true sword.

He was groping for it when he saw the headless cross at his feet. A tau cross, he remembered it was called. He picked it up and carefully tucked the chain in his belt, then all at once became aware that Mary Day was there. She was holding the sword Albericus had fought with.

"I saw it!" she managed to say. "I got here in time to see it all. I—I can hardly believe it, but I saw it." Suddenly she shook her head. "What strange worlds we live in! Though which is the strangest, yours or mine, I hardly know. All I know is that my world has no right to question you or yours, which it surely will be doing soon if the police catch us here." She raised her head quickly, listening. "Oh, dear—there's a police car now! Hurry, everyone—we must get below!"

"But no lights!" Dr. Legrande cautioned, as they tumbled down the stairway and pushed through the swinging cabinet. "It is better that no one know we are here—for what could we say that anyone would believe?"

The fire's glow came through the skylight, enough of it so they could see each other's faces, but not enough to make out the details of the fabled sword Dr. Legrande was hurrying to draw from the torn package. "For five years I have been trying to decipher this inscription near the hilt," he said in his soft Latin, his voice eager as a child's. "But it is in a rare form of Gaelic, and so worn that it has baffled everyone. Would either of you know what it means?"

"Sir Brian can tell you," Merra said, her green eyes suddenly full of mischief.

"But how could I?" Brian protested. "I've never seen it!"

She gave a gay little laugh. "Let him hold it, good sir."

Brian swallowed. Hesitantly, reverently, he reached for the weapon that only the kings of Aradel had owned. His hand closed over the hilt.

Shock like a thunderclap went through him.

"God help me!" he whispered hoarsely.

"What is the matter?" Dr. Legrande asked quickly.

Merra said quietly, "For five years he has been under a spell. Now that he has touched the sword, the spell is broken. He remembers who he is. And indeed he will need God's help."

Mary Day blinked. "Then who—who is he?"

"The rightful heir to the sword he holds," Merra whispered. "He is Brian the Fair of Rondelaine, ranking prince of Aradel, grandson of Gratian, who was king."

She peered up at him shyly. "Brian the Fair, tell them the meaning of the inscription on the sword."

For a moment he barely heard her. He was still in shock, hardly believing the truth. Yet truth it was, for memory was flooding through him: a thousand happy scenes of Rondelaine in its glory … then the dreadful ending. Sharply he lived again the bitter flight from Celadon with Merra and her uncle, years ago when they were fleeing the butchers of Albericus, and again he felt the relief of finding sanctuary in the hut of Harle, the woodcutter. It was much easier, he realized, to be a woodcutter's son than heir to the sword he held.

Finally he saw Mary Day and Dr. Legrande watching him, the first with tears

of understanding in her eyes, the other with the eagerness of a child for knowledge. His hand tightened on the hilt. “The inscription,” he said, “has always been translated into Latin like this:

“‘If strong the hand that wields me be,
And ever good as well,
Then long shall be the reign of he
Who rules fair Aradel.’”

He swallowed, then added firmly, “If I am to rule Aradel, I first must set her free. Though Albericus is dead, there is fighting to be done, and already it has started. We are late—”

“We are not late,” Merra said quickly. “I thought we were at first, but this is my first experience with time and I quite forgot the nature of it. It is impossible to be late if one makes allowances. It was very silly of me.”

“I—I don’t understand,” said Brian.

“I don’t expect you to. It *is* confusing. We were in such haste when we fled from the police and *returned* through time, that I failed to make an allowance in the formula. Which was fortunate in a way, for we arrived home two days before we left.” Her laugh tinkled. “That’s why no one was there.”

“But—but that’s impossible!” he exclaimed.

“No, it isn’t. Oh fie, haven’t I told you there’s no such thing as time?” She rolled her eyes in despair. “But of course you can never understand, being a mere mortal, even though soon to be a king.”

She gave a little sigh, then said, “But have no fear of being late. If we leave three hours from now, we will arrive on the hour of my birth, just as planned.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Mary Day exclaimed. “Those three hours will be the most precious of my life, and of Dr. Legrande’s as well. Your era is such a fabulous one, and we’ve so many questions to ask …”

“But first the swords,” Brian told her. “I came with but one, and I can return with but two. Will you accept the weapon Albericus used? It is almost a duplicate of the one I fought him with.”

“But—but it is a treasure! It must be worth a fortune!”

“All the more reason it should be yours. You—you’ve been a friend. We’ll never forget you!”

It seemed that only minutes had passed instead of hours before he was standing with Merra in the circle she had drawn on the floor, a drowsy Tancred on her shoulder. The true sword hung at his side; the other, won in his first combat, was thrust through his belt. As Merra began her curious chant with its many numbers, he glimpsed Mary Day and Dr. Legrande watching them, breathless and enthralled. Then he closed his eyes with the start of the rhyme:

“By my power, by my right,
Take us back through time tonight …”

He missed the rest, for again memory intruded—only now for a moment he was a stableboy again, and all this was a dream. Then the dream was shattered in the giddiness and the terrible feeling of whirling and flying apart, and abruptly he was back in the reality of the cavelike room adjoining the great oak.

This time, miraculously, he and Merra were on their feet.

The first person he saw was Brother Benedict, who rushed upon him and enclosed him in a bear hug. “God be praised!” the burly monk said fervently. “You are both safe, and you have the sword!”

“He has something else,” came the voice of Nysa, as she shimmered into visibility. “He has the cross of Albericus in his belt! *Don’t tell me*—”

“Yes!” said Merra. “The creature met his match.” She told of the fight, and Brother Benedict said, “Your army awaits you in the grove, my son. They already know who you are, and they are wild to have you lead them. Come, show them the sword and the cross!”

Merra touched his arm. “This is the hour of my birth, so I am sure that all will go well. But—but please promise me one thing.”

“What is that?”

“We cannot change our destiny. I know that soon you will be king, even as I know I will be your queen. But when Rondelaine is ours, will you please bring back the troubadours, and make all of Aradel a land of song and laughter?”

“Of course, Merra. I promise. For that is the way life should be.”

She smiled happily and caused the oaken portal to open for him. He drew a deep breath and went slowly outside, the trophy cross in one hand and the true sword in the other.

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets*: *A Little Robot, Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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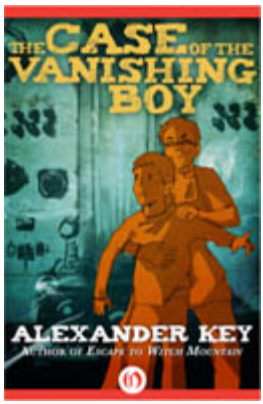

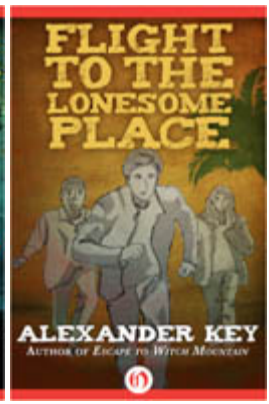

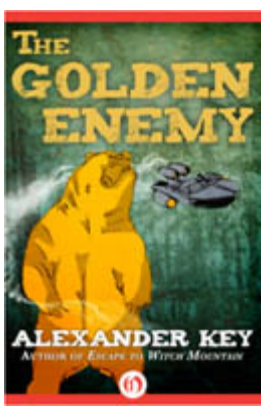

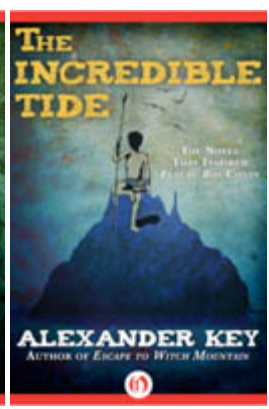

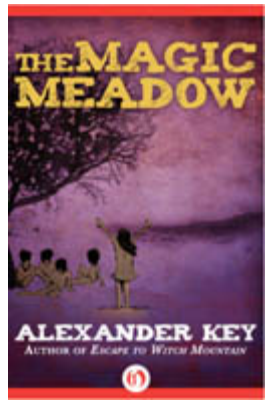

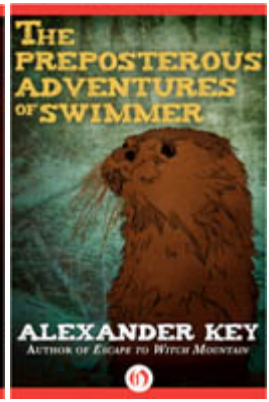

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